This Book Belongs to Re

The original was given
to me by my dear
Father Ernest Nelson
Tomkins Esq who died
in 1981.
The book rebound by me
1982.

RATTLESNAKE RANCH

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"*You are my prisoner,*" *said Sergeant Silk.*

Frontispiece

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RATTLESNAKE RANCH

A STORY OF ADVENTURE IN THE GREAT NORTH WEST

BY

ROBERT LEIGHTON

AUTHOR OF "KIDDIE OF THE CAMP," "COO-EE," ETC. ETC.

London

C. Arthur Pearson Ltd.

Henrietta Street

1912

RATTLESNAKE RANCH

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RATTLESNAKE RANCH

CHAPTER I

DAN MEDLICOTT'S NEW MOUNT

THE tall, red-bearded foreman stood back to contemplate the mare's graceful outlines critically.

"Yes, ma'am," he drawled, removing his pipe to report his expert opinion to the mistress of the ranch, "I allow she's 'bout as shapely a plug's I've seen for a while past: racy, well bred, and a credit to your judgment of horseflesh, ma'am. Some shifty 'bout the eye, maybe. Liable to buck, I'd say; but teachable—teachable, in good hands."

The mistress of the ranch caressed the broncho's soft, velvet muzzle, and then moved aside to let the Indian youth, who held the bridle, lead the mare to and fro across the clearing to exhibit her paces.

"Seems quiet enough now," Mrs. Medlicott observed, standing with her knuckles against her brown leather belt. "I don't fancy she'll buck a great deal when Dannie's astride of her. What do you think of her yourself, Dan?" she questioned, looking up from under her man's wide felt hat into the blue eyes of the mare's proud new owner, perched on the top rail of the garden gate.

Dan Medlicott was dressed in the picturesque and serviceable habit of the far North-West, a blue shirt with a flaming red scarf about the neck, baggy corduroy riding-breeches, and brown jack-boots.

Under the wide rim of his Stetson hat you could see that his hair was fair and curly. You would have said that he was a healthy-looking boy rather than handsome. His blue eyes, if clear, were small; his nose was broad and turned up impudently at the tip, showing the nostrils; but he had a square, deter-

mined jaw, and his mouth, with its firm red lips and strong white teeth, was always pleasant to look upon.

"What do I think of her, mother?" he responded. "Why, she's just a lovely one! Best broncho on the whole ranch, bar none. I don't know how to thank you enough for such a splendid birthday present. I'm goin' to have a canter along the old buffalo trail presently, and see what she can do."

"You'll be back by dinner-time, I hope?" his mother smiled. "You'll keep this side of the Rocky Mountains? Are you taking the Honourable Percy along with you?"

Dan slowly shook his head and glanced over his shoulder to the front verandah, where a young fellow in a Norfolk suit stood at the open window lighting a cigarette.

"Isn't he goin' to help with the ploughing?" he asked.

Mrs. Medlicott shrugged her shoulders.

"He doesn't look it, wearing that stiff white collar and fancy necktie," she said, glancing also towards the verandah. "I'm afraid he's not made for hard work; and, of course, I can't force him, since he is not a paid hand. No, I've come to the conclusion that he's just a waster, that's what Percy is. For all he is learning of practical farming, his parents had better have kept him at home in England. Canada's no place for folks who won't work."

Dan jumped down from his perch.

"I expect, if the truth were known, his parents weren't a whole lot sorry to get rid of him," he ventured to say.

The young fellow in the Norfolk suit and fancy necktie was now strolling down the wide garden path with his cap at the back of his head, his hands deep in his pockets, and his lighted cigarette between his lips.

Mrs. Medlicott turned away and followed the direction already taken by the foreman, through the grove of slender larch and spruce trees that lined the approach to the dwelling-house.

Dan strode to the tie-post, where the Indian boy waited with the mare, patting her, stroking her, and talking to her crooningly in the guttural tongue of his Redskin ancestors. The broncho watched him uneasily, the whites of her eyes showing suspiciously, her long tail slashing, her ears twitching.

"D'you reckon she's all right, Rip?" Dan inquired.

The young Indian nodded. He was known familiarly as "Rip," but his full name was Rippling Water, and he preserved the appearance of his race, not alone in his ruddy skin, dark eyes, and jet-black hair, his high cheek-bones and aquiline nose,

but also in his fringed deerskin jacket, decorated with coloured beadwork, his beaver cap, and his moccasins.

"Guess you'll manage her," he answered in the clear English which he had acquired by long association with the inhabitants of Rattlesnake Ranch.

Rip held the broncho by a long lariat looped about her neck ready to check her. Dan, having seen that the cinchas were tight, twisted his quirt about his wrist, and, taking a grip of the reins and the blanket strap, lifted his foot to the stirrup and quickly mounted to the saddle.

Instantly, Gipsy's head went down between her knees, and she leapt into the air with her back arched like a bridge, and her legs bunched all together.

Dan was shot high out of the saddle, but dropped back to his seat again, still gripping the blanket strap, as Gipsy landed on her outspread feet and gathered herself together again for a succession of rapid, frenzied little jumps, forward and backward.

Keeping his balance with difficulty, Dan gave her a sharp flick on the neck. This seemed to astonish her, and she stood quiet for a few moments, her nostrils quivering, her ears thrown back, and the muscles of her limbs and chest strained rigid. Then she began to pad the ground with her forefeet, dancing and curveting in a circle.

Suddenly she stood upright on her hind legs, pawing the air, and it was only the tension of the lariat that kept her from falling backward upon her rider.

"Quiet, Gipsy; quiet!" Dan said soothingly.

Presently she tried to throw him over her head by flinging up her hind quarters, kicking desperately with her heels, and by renewing her see-saw bucking.

"Thrash her, Dan! Give her a jolly good lacing with that quirt! Give it her! Give it her hard!"

It was the Honourable Percy Rapson who called out this advice, and Dan, mechanically obeying, brought the stinging, raw hide thong down upon her shoulder. Maddened by the pain, the broncho again rose to her hind legs, dancing round and round, wriggling her body and violently flinging back her head. Her rider lost his grip of the strap and grabbed at her mane; but she made a sudden bound forward; he was thrown bodily from the saddle, and only contrived to escape her hoofs by rolling over, while Rip, still clinging to the lariat, was dragged along the grass until the tightening noose round the mare's throat brought her to a halt among the trees.

Dan struggled to his feet, rubbing an elbow, breathing heavily.

The Honourable Percy began to ply him with recommendations as to the best way to subdue a bucking broncho. He had been in Canada six months, and he counted himself an authority on the management of horses.

"You should lam into her," he advised. "Give her a cut across the muzzle with your quirt. There isn't a bit of good in tryin' to coax a skittish animal. You've got to master her, see?"

Dan Medlicott was adjusting his hat and neckerchief, and rolling up his shirt sleeves in a business-like fashion.

"Pr'aps you'd like to mount her yourself," he suggested, a little irritably. "You're free enough with your advice about breakin' in a prairie pony. Suppose you show us how it ought to be done."

Percy Rapson flicked the ash from the end of his cigarette.

"I shouldn't mind—shouldn't mind in the least, if I had my own saddle," he responded in a patronising tone.

Dan looked at him sullenly.

"Isn't mine good enough?" he questioned. "It's new. You can't have a better. Have a try, if you like."

"Thanks," returned Rapson languidly. "I prefer riding a mount that has been properly trained. I don't see the fun of breaking my neck."

Dan nodded.

"Pr'aps you're right," he said coldly. "Bustin' a broncho on the prairie isn't anyways the same thing as ridin' to hounds at home in England."

Percy dropped his cigarette and crushed it under his heel as he made a step forward.

"Do you think I'm afraid?" he protested. "I'll founder that mare, or she shall founder me!"

"Oh, you needn't worry," Dan assured him. "I'm not anyways anxious for you to ride her. Violent exercise isn't good first thing after a meal. I had my breakfast two hours ago, but you've only just finished yours."

Percy seated himself on the edge of a wheelbarrow and prepared to make another cigarette. Dan stood near him, watching his tobacco-stained fingers deftly manipulating the thin strip of paper.

"You're certainly lookin' a bit chippy," he remarked. "Overslept yourself, may be? I don't wonder."

Percy Rapson looked across at him with something of indignant challenge in his tired and bloodshot eyes.

"It's no business of yours what time I come down to breakfast," he objected warmly.

"That's so," acknowledged Dan. "You can lie abed as long as you like for all I'm concerned. At the same time," he went on, leaning slightly forward and lowering his voice, so that Rippling Water might not overhear, "if you've no objection to tellin' me, I'm some curious to know your particular reason for prowlin' around this ranch, mounted on a horse that isn't your own, between two and three o'clock in the mornin'. Queerish time to choose for horse exercise, don't you think?"

Percy Rapson's face went very red.

"You're labouring under a ridiculous mistake," he protested awkwardly. "It must have been someone else that you saw—some stranger. I was in bed at the time you mention—in bed and asleep."

Dan Medlicott's eyebrows were raised almost imperceptibly. He did not further betray his surprise at the falsehood.

"Stranger?" he repeated incredulously. "I wonder why the dogs never barked; wonder how he found his way into the harness-room, and into the house, after he'd stabled the horse! Say, it's a pity I didn't put a bullet into that stranger's leg. Sure as a gun, I'd have fired at him if I hadn't thought he wore a Norfolk suit, the same as you're wearin' now."

Percy was biting nervously at his lower lip. He watched Dan turning away.

"Beastly interfering spy!" he muttered below his breath.

Rippling Water stood at Gipsy's head, quieting her. He had slung the coiled lariat over the cantle, and now Dan gathered the reins and lifted his foot to the stirrup. The broncho swerved as he mounted, but he managed to seat himself securely astride before she attempted to buck.

He had just time to snatch the quirt that Rip handed to him, when the mare humped her back as before, leaping high off her feet. But a touch of the spur as she lowered her nose to repeat the trick made her plunge forward.

For some minutes she pranced, kicked out, threw up her head, and jumped; but Dan had his toes firmly in the stirrups and held a tight grip of the reins.

Again he touched her flanks with his heels, and with a snort and an angry swish of her tail she bounded off at the full gallop, racing down the trail as if a thousand fiends were chasing her.

Dan headed her for the trestle bridge over the surging creek, flooded with melted snow. She dashed across it with a thundering clatter of hoofs and pursued her way by the sledge track, up the incline of the thickly wooded bank, and through the orchard.

Her rider's two hands were sawing at the reins, and his hat was at the back of his neck; but his feet were well set in the low-hung stirrups; his seat in the saddle, with its high cantle to lean against, was secure, and he was not afraid of being thrown. He carried his quirt between his teeth, and made no use of the spurs. All that he tried to do was to keep the mare in the open lane between the double line of bare young apple trees. They flashed by him like the spokes of a revolving wheel; but all he knew of the speed he was making was the rushing away of the earth beneath him and the ceaseless beating of the broncho's hoofs.

Once he raised his head to look over her twitching ears and fluttering mane to the end of the long avenue, where a closed white gate stood across. Then he gathered the reins in his fingers and took hold of the quirt to strike her.

But in the same moment she ceased to fling herself about, and sobered down to a steady, racing stride. She had seen the gate, and, without abating her pace or swerving, she raced up to it, rose to it, cleared the top bar like a trained hunter, and bounded away across the arable land, where the ploughing was in progress.

The men paused in their work to watch her mad careering over the brown stubble.

"Young 'un's larnin' to ride, eh?" observed Chick Nutter, drawing his team to a halt at the end of a long furrow. "Makin' a bee-line for the Rocky Mountains. Won't take him long t' git thar at that rate."

"Larnin'?" repeated Tuppy Quick, glancing aside from his work of repairing a chain-harrow. "Say, you can't larn Dan Medlicott a whole lot 'bout ridin'. Thar ain't a better rider on the whole ranch—'cept old Moose, here."

He indicated a wizened-faced Indian in a red blanket and fur cap, who was sitting on his heels meditatively smoking a very black pipe the while he watched the racing broncho.

"Wough!" he grunted, in appreciation. "Heap good!"

Beyond the fenced-in acres that were now being tilled for wheat, the open prairie pastures stretched in a vast undulating plain of withered grass.

There was no made road, but the indistinct ribbon of an old buffalo trail, scored by the runners of dog-sleds, led westward to a wide swampy hollow, glistening with moisture.

Gipsy pounded along this trail, mile after mile, until her breath came in short quick gasps and her heaving flanks were wet.

Dan turned her from the trail and the marshy ground, and made for a patch of bush. He had meant to turn back as soon as the mare's spirit was subdued, but now, remembering that he carried his pistol and a belt full of cartridges, he saw an opportunity of having some harmless shooting practice.

A short gallop brought him within range of the timber, and, taking out his weapon, he raced to and fro, firing at quickly selected marks, as if each were a lurking enemy.

This was good practice, but it had the disadvantage that he could not tell whether or not he had hit the corner of rock or the tree-trunk, at which he had aimed. He resolved to dismount.

There was a small cottonwood tree about fifty yards away from the pines, and to this he led Gipsy, and, taking the trail rope from the horn of his saddle, he made one end fast to the bit-ring and the other to the tree. He then returned to the pines, and, choosing one of the stoutest of them as a target, he stood off and began to shoot.

Not long had he been thus occupied, surprising himself by the sureness of his aim, when, as he was reloading his revolver, a sound from behind caused him to look back to the cottonwood tree. Gipsy was snorting loudly and pitching and plunging as she tugged violently at the full stretch of the trail rope. Something in her frantic efforts to break free told him that she had scented some danger which was not apparent to himself.

Alarmed, Dan was about to run up to her, but drew suddenly back at sight of the unmistakable cause of her distress. A great, gaunt cinnamon bear, newly arisen from its long winter sleep, came out from among the rocks and tree roots, and made swiftly across the intervening space towards the tree where the mare was tethered.

Dan's revolver was empty, and he knew that he could not reach the tree and remount before the bear should be at the pony's throat. Yet he ran forward, hoping by some manœuvre to outwit the hungry beast.

Even as he ran, however, Gipsy broke loose. The trail rope had been loosely tied upon the bit-ring, the knot had come

undone, and now Gipsy was scampering away across the open ground with the bear in close pursuit.

Had the bear been in good condition, it might easily have overtaken the pony already fatigued; for it takes a very fast horse indeed to keep pace with a cinnamon bear. But this one was evidently still stupid with sleep, and its slab sides and bony shoulders and hips betrayed that during its period of hibernation it had exhausted all superfluous fat. It lumbered along with an awkward, slouching gait, and then stopped with a grunt of disappointment.

Dan had continued running, to see what happened, and was already far beyond the tree, when the bear wheeled round, and, seeing him, made after him, with its mouth open and its small dark eyes gleaming with an evil determination.

Dan retreated, running for the tree as his nearest refuge. As he ran, he could hear the hungry brute behind him, breathing hard—could hear the padding of heavy feet that were gaining upon him. But he reached the tree in advance.

For an instant, he paused to pick up the loose end of his lariat and to fling it over the lowest bough. In doing so, however, he dropped his pistol. There was no time to recover it. All that he could think of now was to climb the tree.

Fortunately, the trunk was slender, and with the help of the hanging rope, he had managed to clamber up into temporary safety just as the bear raised itself upon its hind legs to follow. A jab in the snout with a spurred heel delayed the brute's purpose, and Dan succeeded in getting astride of the lowest branch and hauling up the lariat into his possession.

The bear prowled round and round the tree, glaring up at him with greedy, vicious eyes. It certainly seemed remarkably savage and hungry, and was surely a full-grown specimen of its kind. Even as it sat on its haunches, with the slime dripping from its ugly, chattering jaws, and its long-nailed paws reaching upward, it was taller than any man. It was so near that its rank breath was panting in sickening gusts into Dan's face.

Dan wished that he could fire a pistol bullet into that ugly mouth, with its lolling tongue and yellow fangs. He could see his revolver lying on the ground immediately beneath him. But there was no use in wishing for it. The vital question now was, could the bear climb up to him?

The bear thought that it could, and showed that it thought so by rearing and embracing the tree, pulling up its ponderous weight hand over hand.

Dan meanwhile had opened the loop of his lariat. Awaiting his chance, he cast it, aiming at dropping the running noose over the brute's head. But instead, it fell over an outstretched foreleg, where it was drawn tight.

The bear, losing the momentary support of that limb, slipped to the ground, and the rope, in running out, got looped over Dan's left foot.

The bear was pulling at it.

Dan, clinging with desperate arms to the branch, felt himself being dragged downward by the entangled leg.

The branch was bending and creaking ominously. If it should break ! It was bending lower and lower. He heard it splitting. With his arms and his free leg he clung to it.

The rope slackened for an instant, and the branch sprang upward. Then there came a violent pull, and he heard a sharp sound like the crack of a rifle as the branch broke, and he fell to the ground, striking the top of his head on the pistol with a blow that stunned him.

CHAPTER II

THE UNSEEN HAND

When he opened his eyes his brain was whirling, and the bear lying near him, the tree above him, the blue sky, the prairie and the distant mountains all seemed mixed up together in mad confusion.

But in the midst of the busy whirl he presently became conscious that someone was holding a water-bottle to his lips, and his dazed eyes made out the face of a man wearing a broad-brimmed hat, a red tunic, and blue trousers with a wide yellow stripe. The man was speaking. Dan thought at first that it was a woman's voice, so kindly tender was it.

"You see, I heard your shooting," the stranger was saying. "Then I saw your plug bolting riderless from behind the bluff. When I'd caught the mare I came along to look for her owner and found you here, having a disagreement with the bear."

Dan raised his eyes to the handsome, soldierly face of the man kneeling in front of him, screwing the stopper into the empty water-flask.

"Did you shoot the bear?" he asked in perplexity. He had not realised how completely he had been rescued.

The man smiled.

"I'm glad I was in time. He was ready to eat you, sure."

"You must be an astonishingly good shot," Dan reflected. "But that's to be expected. You're one of the North-West Mounted Police. I can tell by your uniform. And I know by the three stripes on your arm that you're a sergeant. Can you be Sergeant Silk, I wonder?"

The trooper's smile under his drooping black moustache was very winning as he answered with the phrase which Dan afterwards heard so often:

"Why, cert'nly."

"Sergeant Silk!" Dan repeated the name below his breath. "It's strange I never met you before," he said aloud. "I've

always wanted to meet you—ever since I heard the story of what you did when Sheppy Crook got lost in the blizzard."

Sergeant Silk took no notice of this reference to one of his well-known acts of bravery and devotion to duty, but only responded by inquiring :

" How are you now ; better ? "

" Thank you, Sergeant," Dan answered, feeling the top of his head, where a painful lump had risen. " I was only knocked a bit silly by the fall."

Sergeant Silk rose easily to his feet and brushed the mud from his knees with a buckskin gauntlet.

" Yes, it's certainly surprising we never met before," he remarked. " But you have always been away at school when I have called at Rattlesnake Ranch."

Dan drew his feet together and stood up.

" You seem to know me," he said.

" Why, cert'nly. Your mare has the Medlicott brand on her. And I should have known you anywhere by your likeness to your mother and sister."

Taking up his carbine he strode towards the dead bear, which lay on its side where it had fallen with a bullet between its beady little eyes.

" Say, I don't reckon this cinnamon bear's skin's worth carrying away," he said, as a result of its examination of the disreputable carcase. " It's all matted and mangy ; hardly fit to wipe your muddy boots on."

Dan was at his rescuer's side.

" 'Tisn't worth the trouble of skinnin' and luggin' home," he decided. " We can leave him for the coyotes and crows. Which way're you goin', Sergeant ? "

Silk turned his clear, far-seeing eyes eastward across the valley.

" Towards Rattlesnake Ranch," he responded, " to have a jaw with Old Man Morrison, and persuade him to sow oats where he's figuring to put wheat."

He had unfastened Dan's lariat from the tree and was coiling it up with extreme neatness. He now hung the coil over the horn of Gipsy's saddle.

" Do you want a leg up ? " he asked.

Gipsy made no attempt to buck when Dan remounted, but followed quietly at the heels of the troop horse.

Observing his companion riding in advance of him, D admired the soldierly training which enabled the man to app

even here on the prairie as if he had just come off parade. The sun, glowing on the chestnut of his horse and the flaming scarlet of his coat, kindled a line of star specks on the brass cartridges in his belt and brought out many a point of glittering light on harness and accoutrement. He sat in his saddle as if he and his horse were one; not with the free and lazy indifference of the ordinary prairie rider. With his carbine poised across the horn of his stock saddle, he sat erect in the military manner, bearing in his every movement the signs of discipline and of physical fitness, hardened by years of toughest adventure in the wildest of places.

"Yes," said Dan, riding up abreast of him, "I'm glad to have met you. Mother thinks heaps of you. She's always holdin' you up as a model. Says there's nothin' you can't do, except tell a lie."

Sergeant Silk took out his pipe and began to load it. He was silent for some moments. Then he said abruptly:

"I expect you disturbed that bear by your shooting. He hadn't got through with his winter sleep when I found him in his den there a couple of days back."

"A couple of days?" repeated Dan. "Oh, then you haven't just come along from Broken Knee? Where did you sleep last night?"

"Didn't sleep anywhere," was the quiet rejoinder. "I was on duty across there at Hilton's Jump."

His eyes were upon Dan's face as he spoke. Was he wondering how much Dan knew of the Honourable Percy Rapson's secret visits to the half-breed village of Hilton's Jump?

"Watchin' someone?" Dan innocently inquired.

"Having a look around," returned the sergeant, reassured. "You see, some folks don't understand the iniquity of selling whisky to the Indians and half-breeds, contrary to the law of prohibition. It's good sport, I suppose, and there's always a spice of adventure in the trade of smuggling. But since whisky-running is against the law, it has to be checked, the same as horse-stealing and cattle-rustling, or any other crime."

"And who were you watching last night, Sergeant?" Dan asked, trying to conceal the anxiety with which he made the indiscreet inquiry. He was thinking of Percy Rapson.

Sergeant Silk slowly put away his tobacco pouch, and as slowly proceeded to light his pipe. He glanced aside at Gipsy.

"Not a bad mare, that one that you're riding," he remarked. "Prairie bred, I see. Where did you get her?"

" My mother gave her to me this morning," Dan informed him. " This is my birthday. I'm sixteen to-day."

" Ah ! " nodded Sergeant Silk, extinguishing his match between his finger and thumb before throwing it away. " Nice to have a mother like yours. Mine's at home in England. I haven't seen her for many a long day."

" You're English, then, are you ? "

" Why, cert'nly. English born, the same as you and your brother Bob, and all the rest of your happy family."

Dan looked at his companion sharply.

" Happy ? " he repeated, shaking his head. " We're far from that. Mother's not happy. How can she be, with things all goin' wrong as they have been ? First, there was father's death that we never could understand. Then the Indian raid and the stealin' of our cattle and horses. There was the firing of our wheat crop, and ever so many other things. You may not know it, Sergeant, but there's someone who is movin' heaven and earth to ruin us and get possession of Rattlesnake Ranch. For years mother has been fightin' that unseen enemy, without even knowin' who he is. And now there's Bob."

" Bob ? What about Bob ? "

" I wish you could tell me what has happened to him," Dan implored. " We haven't heard of him for days. He was to have come home to the ranch on leave. He was going to help with the seeding and with the round-up, and we can't think what has become of him. There's something mysterious about his disappearance. Do you know anything, Sergeant ? He was in your patrol. Do you know anything ? "

Sergeant Silk's horse at that moment broke into a gallop. Gipsy, also, quickened her pace. The gallop was continued until they came to the edge of the swamp. Dan then repeated his question :

" What has become of my brother Bob, Sergeant Silk ? Do you know ? "

The trooper looked across the marsh as if to pick out the easiest way to the buffalo trail.

" He went off on leave right enough," he answered. " I can tell you that much. Corporal Merryweather has taken his place in the patrol."

" Then why hasn't he come home ? " pursued Dan. " Why hasn't he written ? "

Sergeant Silk shrugged his shoulders.

" Perhaps he has altered his plans. I shouldn't worry

in the Mounted Police isn't likely to disappear for long; and Trooper Medlicott knows his way about, as well as any of us."

"It isn't like Bob to change his plans," Dan insisted, gloomily. "I believe there has been foul play."

"Foul play?" Sergeant Silk moved uneasily in his saddle, and the match that he had struck to relight his pipe went out. "Say, does Mrs. Medlicott share your extraordinary suspicions?"

"I don't know what my mother thinks," Dan resumed. "But no one knows better than you the risks that a lone rider in these parts has to face."

"Sure," assented his companion. "There are many dangers—blizzards, avalanches, quicksands, prairie fires, wolves, even cinnamon bears," he smiled grimly. "But you spoke of foul play. What do you mean?"

"Well," said Dan, "there are some very queer characters knockin' around—men who wouldn't think twice of doin' harm to a trooper if they discovered he was on their track."

"That's so," nodded the sergeant, glancing in the direction of the huts and wigwams of the half-breed settlement, which could now be seen down in the hollow. "But we don't allow them to make any such discoveries. Do you suppose, for example, that anyone last night discovered me prowling around over there at Hilton's Jump? Do you suppose that the fellow I was especially watching and tracking had any notion that I was within a hundred miles of him?"

"But Bob hasn't your skill and experience," Dan reminded him. "He's new to police work. And when I spoke of foul play, it wasn't without reason. Listen, I've got somethin' to tell you—somethin' you ought to know."

Sergeant Silk drew his horse to a halt.

"I'm listening," he said. "Fire away."

"You know Rippling Water, of course?" Dan began. "He's a young Indian who works on our ranch and goes about with me a lot; rather a decent chap, and one of the best trackers I've come across."

"I know him," signified the sergeant. "Son of The Moose That Walks."

"Well," Dan resumed, "Rip and I were trappin' ermine along Grasshopper Creek, on Saturday, and as we were coming home through White Wolf Gap, we came suddenly upon a vicious-lookin' stranger. He was ridin' a piebald mustang, [illegible]ading a barebacked broncho. There was a dog loping [illegible]e a wolf on their trail."

"A little white dog?"

"No! a big brown one—kind of retriever," Dan explained.

"H'm!" Sergeant Silk appeared to be interested. "The spare horse wasn't saddled, you say. Was it shod?"

"Yes. It wasn't a wild one. It looked like a cavalry horse, the same colour as the one you're ridin' now. Rippling Water made out that it was a police horse. When we got alongside of it he looked for the brand of the troop number; but the place where the brand should have been was covered over with mud, as if to hide it. That looked a bit suspicious."

"Why, cert'nly. You figure that the horse was stolen?"

"Yes. And there was somethin' queer about the dog, too," Dan went on. "I noticed, and so did Rip, that she didn't seem to belong to the man. When he snapped his fingers and whistled to her invitingly, she wouldn't come to him, but only curled her lip in a nasty, threatenin' snarl. Rip afterwards made out that she was following the stolen horse and not the man."

"Reasonable inference," nodded Sergeant Silk. "Dog and broncho meant to keep in close company until they should find their lost master, I take it?"

"Yes, but what had become of their master?" Dan wondered uneasily. "That's what Rip and I wanted to know. We followed on their back trail, but couldn't discover anything."

"D'you mind telling me what that stranger was like?" requested Sergeant Silk, gathering the reins in his fingers, but continuing to smoke as if hesitating before crossing the marsh.

"He was a man between forty-five and fifty, I should say," Dan proceeded, "dressed like an ordinary rancher in winter furs; tall, round-shouldered, with a greyish beard, long hair. He wore snow goggles, which he took off as we came abreast of him. I didn't like the looks of him a bit, with his shifty grey eyes, red round the rims, and without lashes. He was so forbidding, we didn't stop to speak to him."

"You'd know him again?"

"Anywhere."

"Which way was he travelling?"

"Westward, towards Broken Knee."

"Ah!" Sergeant Silk touched his horse's flank with his heel. "You've no notion where he'd come from, have you?"

"Well," Dan hesitated. "We followed on his back trail down to the swamp here, about half a mile from where we are at this minute. I reckon he'd come from Hilton's Jump."

"That's likely," nodded the sergeant. "Say, we might pick

up some news of him if we were to ride round that way. You'll come ? Good. We'll push on, then. But before we go any farther, let me understand your theory. You believe that this stranger has done away with the owner of the stolen broncho—hidden the saddle and bridle, maybe ? "

" Rippling Water figured it out that way," Dan answered, " and I agreed with him. What's more, I believe that the broncho was my brother Bob's. I'd be pretty certain if it wasn't for the dog. I never heard of Bob havin' a dog like that one. Have you ever seen him with such a dog, Sergeant ? "

Instead of answering, Silk led off at a gallop in the direction of Hilton's Jump. Dan had difficulty in keeping up with him, for Gipsy seemed to know that this was not the nearest way home to Rattlesnake Ranch. But when they had gone some distance, the sergeant suddenly drew rein and dismounted. Dan saw that he was looking down at the moist ground.

" Guess I've struck the trail of that horse thief," Sergeant Silk announced as Dan rode up to him. " Here's the hoof marks of the broncho, sure enough. And by the looks of them, I'd say those hoofs had been shod by a smith who knew his business. Yes, you and your Indian friend weren't far out when you figured that it was a troop horse. Say, though, I don't see any signs of Old Chunk ! "

" Who's Old Chunk ? " Dan inquired.

" Who is he ? Why, Trooper Medlicott's brown retriever. We ought to find his footmarks. Ah ! this looks like a dog's trail ! "

Dan dismounted and together they followed the tracks, which became more and more distinct as they led downward to a dark, stagnant pool among the withered reeds.

" I expect the dog went down to the water for a drink," suggested Dan. " See ! here's his return trail ! "

Sergeant Silk shook his head.

" A drink ? " he repeated incredulously. " Can't you smell that the mud's saturated with coal oil ? A dog wouldn't drink water from here."

Dan followed him and presently, mingled with the dog's footmarks, they came upon the impressions of a man's boots.

" Don't just see why that man came fooling about this swamp," reflected the sergeant.

At the water's edge he stopped and searched curiously from side to side. Then, stepping ankle deep into the water, he bent down.

"Say, Dan, my boy, what's this?" he cried, picking up something which he examined intently before throwing it back at Dan's feet.

Dan saw that it was a trooper's cartridge belt. The cartridges had all been removed and the pistol pocket was empty.

"Guess that belonged to Trooper Medlicott," Sergeant Silk announced. "It's got his initials on it. But where is Trooper Medlicott himself?"

Dan looked at him perplexed.

"Bob would hardly have parted with his belt if he'd been alive," he quietly conjectured. "Oughtn't we to drag the pond?"

"What?" cried Silk. "You suspect that we should find him—his body— under the water?"

"I'm afraid that's just what I do suspect," Dan averred. "There's been foul play. It's the hand of that secret enemy again."

CHAPTER III

HILTON'S JUMP

Sergeant Silk was continuing his search of the soft, marshy ground.

"You appear to have made up your mind that they were not Trooper Medlicott's own feet that made this track that we've been following," he said slowly. "What's your reason?"

"Well," returned Dan, "even if Bob had been on furlough, he'd still be wearin' his uniform, wouldn't he?"

"Sure," Silk nodded.

"In that case," Dan resumed, "he'd have on his winter moccasins and not heavy boots like those that made these tracks, and where his heels sink deep in the mud there'd certainly be the marks of his spurs, the same as your and my heels have made."

"That's good reasoning," Sergeant Silk acknowledged. "I was wondering if you'd noticed the absence of spur marks. But if these aren't Bob's footprints, we needn't search farther. You see, they don't go to the edge of the water, and nothing so heavy as a man's body was thrown in. Neither have we come upon any signs of a struggle. Guess we may as well quit. Perhaps we shall hear something at Hilton's Jump."

He turned aside and strode back to the two horses that were nibbling at the young grass. Mounting to his saddle, he rode off across the plain with Dan at his side.

Dan Medlicott was familiar with the distant sight of Hilton's Jump, nestling in a malarial hollow with its grimy-looking log cabins and dilapidated teepees, that were a blot upon the fresh green of the prairie; but he had never yet been actually within the precincts of the unsavoury settlement of indolent Indians and noisy half-breeds, and he grasped willingly at the opportunity of gratifying his curiosity under the protection of an officer of the Mounted Police.

"You may as well come into the encampment along with me,"

Sergeant Silk recommended. "You'll be quite safe. And while I'm mooching about attending to things, you can have a quiet spy around for signs of that horse thief. If you spot anything suspicious, don't make a song of it. Just ask me what o'clock it is, and I shall understand."

The two riders approached the village by way of a trail winding through a dense grove of willows, and their arrival was announced by a noisy swarm of Indian dogs that came out to meet them.

Sergeant Silk hobbled the two horses together, and, leaving his carbine and revolver behind, strode with a military clink of spurs in among the squalid huts and smoke-grimed wigwams. He went unarmed to show that it was beneath the white man's dignity to carry a weapon as though he were frightened of attack.

At his approach, the inhabitants scattered guiltily into their hovels like startled rats. But the sergeant knew that, although they had disappeared, there was many a pair of dark eyes furtively watching him from within the shadowed doorways and behind closed windows. Crime was so common among these wanderers of the West, that in almost every family it was possible to find one or more law breaker who had cause to dread the sight of the red-coated Riders of the Plains.

Before the door of one of the wigwams a dead dog lay in a muddy pool, almost invisible through the cloud of flies buzzing about it. The sergeant stopped.

"Here, you!" he called aloud, kicking his toe against the closed door-flap.

There was a whispering debate going on in the dim interior. On the repetition of his summons a slim, dark-visaged half-breed appeared, his shifty black eyes avoiding the face of the soldier-policeman.

"Oh, it's you, Jean Jolicœur," said Sergeant Silk. "Well, just clear this mess away from here if you don't want to breed a pestilence."

Jean drew a deep breath of relief on realising that the officer had not come to arrest him, and at once proceeded to obey.

At the side of a log hut the sergeant halted to examine a bullock's hide that was hung over a cross bar. The brand upon the skin satisfied him that the animal when alive had not been stolen. All his senses seemed to be alert as he went along.

Once he followed a young Indian, who slunk into his teepee, and came out to empty a flask of contraband whisky into the

gutter. He paused to watch a squaw making a beaver-skin cap, and Dan was surprised to see him take out his pocket-book and give her a new needle in place of the rusty one with which she was working.

"Tell me, Mère Susanne," he said to her in a cautious whisper, "where shall I find Antoine?"

For answer she half turned her head and glanced in the direction of a large, timber-built shed standing conspicuously apart from other dwellings in the open square that formed the centre of the village.

"Good," nodded the sergeant. And to Dan Medlicott he said: "Stroll on in front of me a bit to the store, there, as if you were alone."

Dan went forward to the big building, and when he came within sight of its side doorway he saw three or four horses tethered by their bridles to the tie-posts. He was surprised to recognise one of them as a horse from Rattlesnake Ranch, and to observe that it bore across its back a saddle which was unmistakably the property of Percy Rapson.

What had attracted Percy Rapson to Hilton's Jump?

Dan was wondering this when he noticed further that another of the waiting horses was the same piebald mustang of which he had spoken to Sergeant Silk.

He was on the point of turning back to inform the sergeant of his discovery, when a very tall Indian, coming out from one of the shacks, glided past him, and went up to the officer, thrust forth his hand from under his blanket, and muttered the Redskin salutation:

"*How!*"

Dan saw Sergeant Silk turn the hand aside and heard him say to the Indian in a quiet, level voice:

"When I take your hand in mine, Soaring Eagle, it will be to put a pair of steel bracelets on your wrists. Do you understand?"

"Ough!" grunted Soaring Eagle, wincing as from a blow. Then a look of cunning enmity flashed from under his frowning brows.

Sergeant Silk saw that look, but he only smiled and turned to enter the store with a light step of unconcern. As he crossed the threshold, he paused for an instant, with the sunlight gleaming on his red coat. Dan saw his clear eyes sweep round the large, dark room in one quick comprehending glance.

The room was thronged with men—Indians in buckskins and fur caps, half-breeds who talked noisily in Canadian-French,

and a sprinkling of white ranchers and cowboys, who were grouped about the stove, smoking, drinking, and gambling. Above the hum of talk there sounded the twang of a guitar and a man's voice singing.

As Silk strolled within, there was a sudden hush. The man with the guitar continued his song, but other voices dropped to a whisper, dominoes ceased to rattle, dice boxes were quiet, gamblers at the tables stopped their games, and sat back in their chairs furtively staring at the unexpected visitor over the tops of their cards. Some of them respectfully saluted as the officer wandered past them towards the counter; some had risen to their feet and were moving stealthily in the direction of the door.

Two Indians, who had stood at the bar, hurriedly pushed back their empty glasses and glided guiltily away, with their blankets over their heads.

Dan Medlicott, feeling very much of an intruder in this strange place, had taken only a couple of hesitating strides into the saloon, when he came to an abrupt halt at sight of a young fellow in a Norfolk suit, whom he instantly recognised.

Upon the entrance of the red-coated representative of law and order, Percy Rapson bent forward over the table, the better to conceal himself. But as Silk went beyond him he flung aside his unplayed cards and stood up as if with the intention of making his escape from the disreputable situation.

"Set down!" muttered the man at his side, tugging at his jacket. "What're you scared at? Th' ain't no lor agin playin' a innercent hand at poker. Set down, an' go on with the game. You ain't goin' ter quit a pool like this. Forty's up agin you."

Percy Rapson's face was flushed with bad liquor and the worse excitement of play. The smoke rising from the cigarette between his fingers betrayed the unsteadiness of his nerves.

He glanced timidly towards the door and said something about wanting to get out of this. Already he had lost enough money to justify his eagerness to escape; but then there was a chance of his winning it back, and he meekly yielded to the repeated urging of his companions. He was a living example of the boy who has not the moral courage to say "No."

He had not observed Dan Medlicott standing looking at him from the shadows within the doorway, and trusting that Sergeant Silk would presently go out without seeing him, he gathered his cards, sat down on a corner of his chair, and, becoming desperate, raised the bet to the limit.

Dan heard him declare "Four nines," and caught the words of another of the players: "Not good enough. Four kings."

Passing close behind Percy's chair, Dan went farther into the saloon and paused beside the handsome young half-breed who was playing the guitar and singing, in what Dan thought a very silvery voice, the familiar French-Canadian song of the old voyageurs:

"Alouetté, gentille Alouetté—
Alouetté—je te plumerai!"

While he listened, he watched Sergeant Silk and saw him advance to the bar where the two Indians had stood drinking.

Very casually and without any obvious reason, the sergeant took up one of the empty glasses, just as the bar-tender was stretching forth his hand to remove it. Silk then raised the glass and sniffed at it to know what it had contained. Whatever flavour he detected, he betrayed no suspicion. Sergeant Silk, indeed, never seemed to see or hear or smell anything that could make a feature of his face alter. He pushed the glass back across the counter, and quietly shaking his head when the bar-tender asked him if he would take anything, turned with a smile of recognition to the man who was singing.

"Still at that same old song, Antoine?" he remarked. "Why, you were singing it, sitting on that same empty packing-case, the last time I was here."

Antoine laid aside his guitar, drew his right leg farther across the knee upon which it rested, and took a cigarette from behind his ear.

"Dat was long tam ago," he responded lightly, speaking in the quaint broken English of the Canadian half-breed. "M'sieu 'ave good mem'ry, eh?"

Silk watched him lighting his cigarette, taking out his own pipe.

"Three weeks," he said, lowering his eyes until they halted upon the upturned sole of Antoine's boot. "It was just after the big snow-fall, you know."

Dan Medlicott followed the sergeant's glance at the man's boot, and gave a little start of surprise; for he perceived by the rows of nails in the thick leather sole, and by the shape of the sole itself, that it exactly resembled the impressions made in the moist ground beside the swamp.

Antoine was puffing with evident enjoyment at his cigarette. The smoke drifted in a thin blue mist towards Sergeant Silk, who inhaled its fragrance.

"Nice aristocratic tabac you're smoking, Antoine," the sergeant casually remarked, tapping the empty bowl of his briar on the palm of his bare hand. "Got any more of it, by chance?"

"Alas, no," Antoine regretted with a shrug of his shoulders.

"I thought not," Silk nodded comprehendingly. "There's only one person hereabout who goes to the extravagance of Turkish cigarettes. Perhaps he obliged you with one when he was here last night? Or was it to-day, when he came in to—lose more of his money?"

Antoine's black eyebrows raised themselves, and he shot a quick glance towards where Percy Rapson was sitting.

"So?" he responded, "den you know heem was here de las' night?" he interrogated, hardly above a whisper. "You savee heem here now?"

"Why, cert'nly." Sergeant Silk looked at the half-breed curiously from under the shadowing rim of his Stetson hat. "Strike up another song, Antoine," he said. "And—listen!—meet me, ten o'clock to-night, by the white gate at Rattlesnake Ranch."

In the midst of the twanging of Antoine's guitar, Silk turned to Dan, who had lingered near him, feeling uncomfortably conspicuous.

"What're you going to drink, Medlicott?" the sergeant invited. "Have a soda and milk, eh?"

"I'm not anyways thirsty, Sergeant," Dan answered. "But I wish you'd smuggle me out of here, somehow. I'm nervous. And—and—mother wouldn't like me to be in a place like this."

"Not even under my protecting wing, I suppose?" smiled Silk. Beckoning to the bar-tender, he ordered the drinks, and added: "And tell Josh Casterley that I want to see him."

The bar-tender shuffled a bit uneasily on his feet.

"Josh ain't in," he answered. "He's bossin' around on the ploughed land."

"Eh?" Sergeant Silk took a match from the box on the counter and looked very straight into the bar-tender's reddening face. "Jest you cut along and tell Josh Casterley I'm wanting to see him," he insisted.

Dan Medlicott plucked at the soldier-policeman's sleeve.

"Say, Sergeant," he whispered, "that Indian you wouldn't shake hands with has just come in."

"Yes, I know," nodded Silk.

It seemed to Dan that his companion had eyes in the back of

his head, as well as in the usual place, and presently he had a further illustration of the alertness of the man's senses.

Silk was lighting his pipe with slow deliberation, and the match was burning short. He extinguished the tiny flame with a nip between his finger and thumb and was holding the dead match poised before dropping it to the floor, when Dan saw him wheel round on his heels.

There was a slight commotion in the room. Some of the men had risen from their seats. Antoine had stopped playing. There was a dead silence.

"Well?" Sergeant Silk's voice sounded as though he were speaking to some stray dog that was crawling up to him.

Dan Medlicott, looking back inquiringly, saw the figure of Soaring Eagle crouched down, menacingly near to the red-coated officer. The Indian's blanket had fallen from his right shoulder and arm, and in his hand he held a long and formidable knife.

"Well?" exclaimed Sergeant Silk, showing no trace of alarm. "Why don't you strike? I am unarmed. You're among your friends. I'm at your mercy. Why don't you do it? You low-down coward, you're afraid to strike!"

Soaring Eagle slowly lowered the knife. It dropped to the floor. He drew back a step, muttering vague threats; then, throwing back his head, he started forward, holding out his arms for the handcuffs.

Standing at his ease with an elbow on the counter, Sergeant Silk quietly puffed at his pipe. He seemed to be counting the moments during which the Indian lingered in expectation of arrest; but presently he took his pipe from his lips, pointed with its stem towards the door, and said in a firm voice of command:

"Quit!"

Soaring Eagle flung the loose corner of his blanket across his shoulder, and, leaving his knife where it had fallen, slunk guiltily out of the saloon, watched by many eyes.

CHAPTER IV

SERGEANT SILK ON DUTY

As he disappeared, there was a murmur of question and comment, mingled with such cries as "Your deal, Nosey!" and "I go limit," while Antoine twanged vigorously at his guitar and continued his interrupted song as if nothing unusual had occurred.

"That's all right," nodded Sergeant Silk, and he swung round to the counter to pass the glass of milk and soda-water to Dan Medlicott, himself taking up a tankard of lager beer.

Dan marvelled at this man with the white man's courage, who had shown such coolness in a moment of danger; but he said no word, and tried to look as unconcerned as everyone else seemed to be.

Presently, Silk strolled across the saloon, apparently to watch at closer quarters a game of chess, which two frontiersmen were playing, and Dan, left alone, leant with his back against the bar and began to wonder how long he was to be kept in this haunt of iniquity. He turned his gaze towards the far-off table, where Percy Rapson sat intent upon his handful of greasy playing cards. He heard Percy's boyish English voice declare a "straight flush," and saw him reach forward to scoop a pile of coins and slips of paper towards him.

Percy seemed to be winning now. He looked so much at his ease that Dan was assured anew that this was far from being the first time that he had joined in a game of poker at Hilton's Jump. Indeed, it was obvious from his behaviour that he was a regular frequenter of the saloon.

Dan wondered what the Honourable Percy's aristocratic parents would think if they knew that this was the way in which he was fulfilling their intention that he should come out to Canada to learn farming.

When they had written to Mrs. Medlicott about him, they had expressed the hope that the open-air life on a Canadian ranch and association with honest and industrious settlers would

tend to make Percy more self-reliant and manly ; but six months had gone by, and he had not yet shown any disposition to do useful work, and had learnt so little of farming that he still hardly knew the difference between a plough and a harrow or between wheat and oats.

Mrs. Medlicott had described him as a waster ; but even Mrs. Medlicott did not know the extent to which the description suited him. She had believed that his frequent absence from the ranch was due merely to his love of horsemanship, and would have been more than astonished if anyone had suggested that Percy had ever been within a mile of Hilton's Jump.

Dan was arguing with himself as to whether or not it would be wise to go up to Percy and entreat him to leave the saloon. Whether he was winning or losing was of no consequence. He was clearly excited, and the gambling spirit had obviously taken its insidious hold of him. Naturally he would resent being interfered with, and especially by a boy younger than himself. But Dan was not discouraged on that account. He hesitated only because he could not determine what form his interference should take.

He decided at last that he would go boldly up to him, and, without reproach or accusation, quietly invite him to ride home with him. And so resolving, he drank his milk and returned his empty glass to the counter.

Just as he did so, he was aware that a door behind the bar opened, and he shrank back at sight of the man who entered—a tall, heavily built man, with a greyish beard and red-rimmed, blinking eyes. He was dressed in the ordinary frontiersman's winter jacket and corduroys, with a blue shirt and a wide felt hat.

Dan knew him at once as the owner of the piebald mustang whom Rippling Water and he had encountered in White Wolf Gap in possession of Bob Medlicott's troop horse ; and he rightly conjectured that he was Josh Casterley, the owner of these stores.

" Well, young 'un," said Casterley, coming to a standstill with a finger in the pages of the ledger he was carrying. " Who are you ? and where d'you come from ? "

Dan stared back at him.

" I'm from Rattlesnake Ranch," he answered.

The information had a curious effect upon the storekeeper, for he gave a short quick gasp and gripped the ledger so tight that the knuckles of his hand showed white. His grey eyes blinked.

"One of the Medlicotts, I presume? H'm!" he muttered. "Don't reckon I've ever seen you before."

"You saw me in White Wolf Gap last Saturday," Dan corrected him, "when you were takin' off my brother's broncho, which——"

He checked himself. He was going to say "which you had stolen," but he thought he had better leave such business to Sergeant Silk.

And at this moment Sergeant Silk strode to his side.

"Well, Josh?" he said, looking across the bar counter.

"Good morning, Sergeant," returned Casterley, a little awkwardly, touching the rim of his hat. "You're quite a stranger here. Jules told me you'd dropped in."

"I was thinking it was about time," rejoined Silk. "You see, it's as well to remind you occasionally of the existence of the law. You are liable to forget it. Indeed, I'm afraid I've already been too long in dropping in."

"Oh?" Casterley looked uncomfortable, as if he resented this surprise visit of the officer of police. "How so? Nothing going wrong, I hope?"

"Well," resumed Silk, putting away his pipe and thrusting his leather gauntlets into the opening of his red jacket. "I find you have forgotten the prohibition against selling liquor to the Indians. When I came in just now, I discovered two of them—Medicine-Pipe-Stem and Bear's Paw—drinking whisky."

Josh Casterley shook his head.

"'Tain't possible," he denied.

Sergeant Silk pointed across to a ledge surrounding the sink.

"You will find their empty glasses over there," he said. "They've not been washed out. Put your nose to one of 'em."

While the storekeeper turned his back, Dan's foot pressed against his companion's moccasin.

"Say, Sergeant," he said, "I don't see a clock in this shanty. What's the time?"

The sergeant's black moustache flickered in a smile.

"Guess it's just on noon," he answered, with a look towards Casterley, which told Dan that he understood.

Muttering something which Dan did not catch, Josh Casterley took up one of the glasses and held it to his nose.

"Call that whisky?" he said with a forced laugh. "It's only innocent ginger ale."

"Taste it," urged Silk.

"What?" objected Casterley. "D'you think I'm going to drink after a dirty Red Injun?"

The sergeant humoured him so far as to suggest that he should pour a drop on the back of his hand and taste it, and Casterley reluctantly obeyed.

"M'yes," he admitted. "Guess that's whisky—very weak. Jules must have served it by mistake."

"Then you admit that you have whisky on your premises," pursued the officer.

Casterley frowned, and his lashless eyes blinked more nervously than ever.

"I'm entitled to have as much as five gallons," he reminded his inquisitor.

"Yes," Silk acknowledged. "But I've a notion that you have a good deal more than the lawful quantity. Just step round to the front of the bar."

"Me?" exclaimed the surprised landlord.

"Why, cert'nly. You ain't deaf. You heard what I said."

Sergeant Silk turned to the half-breed, Antoine, who was still fingering the strings of his guitar.

"Clear yourself and your banjo away from that packing-case, my man," Silk ordered peremptorily, as if Antoine were a total stranger to him.

As Antoine obeyed, the sergeant took a grip of the packing-case and heeled it to one side. He bent down and seized at an iron ring, pulled at it, and opened a trap-door.

There was a slight commotion among the men near him.

"Guess the Ferret has dropped on a warm scent this time," said one.

"Sure," agreed another.

"Say, you'll find nothing there," cried Josh Casterley, in agitation, as he hastened to the hiding-place of his illicit goods. "Thar's nothing there but a few cans of coal-oil."

"I can see the cans," nodded Silk, going down on his knees and lifting one of them out. He dropped it with a heavy thud on the floor, unscrewed the stopper, and poured some of the liquid contents into the palm of his hand.

In the silence which fell over the saloon, Dan heard Percy Rapson's clear English voice calling out:

"Go on, Nosey; that's up against you."

"Ough!" grunted one of the Indians, watching the red-coated officer wastefully spilling the strong-smelling spirit from his hand to the floor. "Firewater! Heap good!"

Sergeant Silk replaced the stopper and put the can back where he had found it. Then, closing the trap, he stood upon it, meditatively stroking his chin.

"Well?" he said, his eye fixed upon Josh Casterley's guilty countenance.

"Guess you've jumped my cache," muttered Josh. "But I reckon I can afford to pay the fine."

"You'll be lucky if you escape with a mere fine," returned Silk. "This isn't your only offence, by a long way."

As he spoke, he took a short strip of tape and a piece of red sealing-wax from his pouch. He knelt and placed the tape across the corner of the trap-door, and, lighting a match, sealed the tape in position, so that the trap could not be opened without breaking the impression of his ring on the wax.

"I shall send a couple of troopers along to confiscate the whisky, and serve you with a formal summons," he told Casterley.

"You're not going to waste the precious stuff, are you?" grumbled Josh. "It cost me a lot."

"It has got to be destroyed," decided the officer.

"Say, d'you mind tellin' me just how you got wind of it, Sergeant?" Casterley asked. "You were smart in getting on my track. Yet nobody knew you were within a hundred miles of Hilton's Jump."

"That's my business, not yours," retorted Silk, and, turning to Dan Medlicott, he said: "Come along, Dan, there's only one other little matter to see to. Then we shall cut along to the ranch."

Dan wanted to urge him to interrogate Josh Casterley about the stolen broncho, and the mysterious disappearance of Trooper Medlicott, but already his companion was striding silently down the length of the saloon.

When he arrived at the end table, he paused behind the chair occupied by the Honourable Percy Rapson. Percy was losing heavily now, and he was too much absorbed in the play to be aware of who was standing near him. He was nervously examining his cards and was on the point of raising his stake, when a hand was laid on his shoulder.

"Come with me," said Sergeant Silk.

Rapson looked round with a guilty start. He saw Dan Medlicott as well as the red-coated soldier-policeman, and instantly he jumped to the conclusion that Dan had betrayed him.

"Why should I go with you?" he cried with the gambler's bravado.

And Dan Medlicott was not less astonished than Percy himself when the sergeant answered gravely:

"You are my prisoner. Come!"

. . . . . .

"Why have you arrested me?"

Percy Rapson turned in his saddle and looked defiantly at the red-coated officer who rode beside him. Since leaving Hilton's Jump he had taken refuge in sullen silence, asking for no explanation and yielding himself without protest to the awkward situation. But now that the fresh open air of the prairie had somewhat cleared his muddled brain, he began to realise that his position threatened to be more serious than he had at first supposed.

"Why have you arrested me?" he demanded doggedly. "It's due to me that I should know what offence I've committed. Why am I your prisoner?"

Dan Medlicott, who rode at his other side, listened anxiously for the expected answer, wondering what Percy Rapson had done which should justify his summary arrest, while such rough and evil-living criminals as many whom he had seen in the saloon remained at liberty.

Sergeant Silk was slowly drawing on his buckskin gauntlets.

"You don't appear to be anyway pleased that I should have pulled you out of such a pestilential sink of iniquity as that," he said, with a backward toss of the head in the direction of the village they had just left.

"I never asked you to pull me out," Percy retorted sullenly. "I was there by my own will. It's no business of yours where I go."

Silk balanced his carbine more squarely across his saddle, and arranged his reins very precisely in his gloved fingers. He sat upright, looking straight in front of him between his broncho's ears.

"Can't congratulate you on your choice of companions," he remarked drily. "And a gambling den like Josh Casterley's grocery store isn't quite the place where I should naturally expect to find the son of an English nobleman wasting his money and his time."

"Oh?" Percy Rapson gave an uncomfortable little laugh. "That's why you arrested me, is it—merely as a blind? You wanted to protect me from possible contamination? You might have saved yourself the trouble. I'm perfectly well able to look after myself. And even if you had any right to interfere

with me, surely you could have done so without going through the ridiculous formality of arresting me! It occurs to me, Sergeant Silk," he added contemptuously, "that you exceeded your duty that time. And I've a jolly good mind to report you to your superiors."

"Do, by all means," smiled Sergeant Silk. "I can assure you in advance that your complaint will receive every attention at headquarters."

"Yes," pursued Rapson, growing reckless, "and I shall add that the reason why you neglected your duty and didn't arrest Josh Casterley was because Josh bribed you handsomely to hush up that affair of the smuggled whisky that you found under the floor."

Dan Medlicott detected a slight twinkle of amusement in Sergeant Silk's eyes, and heard him say:

"Bribed? Did you say that Josh Casterley offered me a bribe and that I took it? If you can prove that, you'll have a strong case indeed. I should be dismissed the force, right away. But, of course, you're talking through your hat, and Josh Casterley's too old a bird to give himself away in that fashion."

The Honourable Percy Rapson lapsed into silence, knowing that he had made a stupid mistake. Sergeant Silk touched his broncho's flank with the toe of his moccasin, and the three riders started off at an easy gallop, which was continued until they came to the buffalo trail, when Silk slowed down to allow his two companions to come level with him.

"Here we part company, I suppose," he said to Dan. "You can inform Mrs. Medlicott that she need not expect Mr. Rapson home at the ranch for an indefinite time. Tell her that he has gone with me."

Percy Rapson stared at him in astonishment.

"Where do you think you're going to take me?" he demanded to know.

"To the barracks, at Broken Knee," he was told.

"But that's ridiculous," he protested. "It's no crime to play an innocent game of poker."

"I don't pretend that it is," returned Silk. "You may allow yourself to be cheated out of your money as much as you like. As you say, it is not an indictable offence."

"Cheated?" exclaimed Percy.

"Why, cert'nly," the sergeant nodded. "The cards were marked. Nosey Foster cheated you right and left. He doesn't know the way to play a straight game."

"It's a lie!" cried Rapson. "I was winning when you came up. I should have won back all I'd lost if you hadn't meddled with what doesn't concern you."

He tugged at his bridle rein as though to accompany Dan homeward. But Sergeant Silk's horse was again close at his side.

"You are my prisoner," the officer reminded him, a little more sternly than he had previously spoken. "Do you understand?"

"No, I do not understand," Percy retorted angrily. "You can't arrest me for nothing."

"It is not for nothing that you are arrested."

Sergeant Silk glanced aside at Dan Medlicott. Dan took the glance as a hint to him to withdraw to a discreet distance.

"You needn't be afraid of Medlicott hearing," Percy interposed. "I expect he's your paid spy and has been cramming you with all sorts of lies about me. Of course, it was he who put you on my track!"

Dan Medlicott took example by Sergeant Silk's coolness, and bringing his horse round so that he could face Percy Rapson, he said very calmly:

"You've made a mistake there, Percy. I have never even mentioned you to Sergeant Silk. But even if I had done, I couldn't have told him anything against you—anything that's against the law."

Percy looked at the sergeant as if to measure how much he really knew, and gathering courage from his belief that he was safe from serious suspicion, he said:

"Well, since you've no charge against me, I suppose I may go on my way?"

"I have not released you," the officer said sharply. "You are still my prisoner, remember. And if it suits my convenience to let you go home to Rattlesnake Ranch, it will only be on your parole. You must give me your word of honour that you will not go beyond the bounds of the homestead, and that you will hold no communication with Hilton's Jump. Either you do this or else you ride with me to-night to barracks, and there learn why you are arrested."

"But I have promised to go again to Hilton's Jump," Percy faltered, feeling now that the soldier-policeman was not to be trifled with. "I have given my word—to a friend."

"A friend? Do you call Soaring Eagle your friend?"

Dan saw Percy Rapson's left hand tighten on the thongs

of his reins, saw his face go very red, and then become ashen white.

"What do you know about Soaring Eagle?" Percy cried with a nervous catch in his voice. His alarm was unmistakable.

"I know that he is no fit friend for one brought up as you have been," returned Sergeant Silk. "There's not much of the noble savage about him: coward, liar, trickster, drunkard. That's what he is. Why, even while he was working with you last night he was deceiving you."

"Last night?"

"Yes. Do you suppose I don't know how you were occupied when you ought to have been in your bed? You were occupied in conveying into Hilton's Jump a supply of contraband spirits, bought with your money and sold at a stiff profit to Josh Casterley. You were engaged in the exciting game of whisky-running. Oh, you needn't attempt to deny it. I was watching you all the time, and you managed very cunningly, for a beginner. But beginners often bungle things, and you bungled badly last night when you trusted to an Indian keeping his mouth shut while there was firewater for him to drink."

Percy Rapson's bloodshot eyes flashed in accusing anger at Dan Medlicott.

"It was you who put him up to this!" he cried. "It was you who betrayed me. You spy! You sneak!"

"Enough of that!" interposed Sergeant Silk. "Dan Medlicott knew nothing, and I did not need to be put up to anything. I've been crossing your tracks for a while past. So now, you see, it wasn't for gambling that I arrested you, but for something much more serious. Don't imagine, however, that I have been searching for evidence against you. I've not been able to help myself. I should have been blind not to see the way you were going, and I should have failed in my duty if I hadn't put you under arrest." He twitched at his bridle rein. "And now," he concluded, "what do you decide—to go with me to the barracks and be charged with your offence, perhaps to be imprisoned, or to give me your parole and wait until it suits me to take you before the magistrate?"

Percy Rapson's answer came quickly, but it was accompanied by a frown of rebellious indignation.

"I give you my parole," he said.

CHAPTER V

THE TIGHTENING COILS

"THIS disappearance of Bob's is most mysterious," sighed Mrs. Medlicott. "I can't explain it. I can't understand. If he had only written——"

Her daughter Joan looked round at her from the stove, where she was cooking the dinner, helped by an Indian girl.

"I shouldn't fret, if I were you, mother," she said consolingly. "What harm could come to him? I dare say he has only gone on police duty somewhere off his usual patrol, where there's no post-office. They often go off that way, on secret service, you know."

"Yes, I dare say," acknowledged Bob's mother. "But he'd have told us not to expect him home. I'm beginning to believe that something has happened to him, as with your father, who disappeared in the same way—some accident, or, perhaps, he has even met with foul play. And this, coming on the top of all our other troubles, makes me fear that there is some hidden enemy working against us, as there seems to have been ever since we came out to Canada. It would have been so different if your father had lived, or even if your uncle hadn't neglected us."

Joan Medlicott was silent until Maple Leaf, the Indian girl, had glided away into the scullery. Then she said:

"Uncle has treated us shamefully, having persuaded us to come out to Alberta, promising us so much, and then abandoning us to ourselves. We should have been better off at home in England. Did you ever see him, mother? I often wonder what kind of a man he is. I'm sure he wasn't at all like father, and he can't be a gentleman."

Mrs. Medlicott shook her head sadly.

"No, I never saw him," she responded. "You see, he came out to Canada long before his brother, your father. Then he wrote home, urging us all to come out and settle here, and the prospects were so bright that we came, and took Rattlesnake

Ranch. He never came near us. He'd gone to the gold diggings, leaving instructions for father to follow him. What happened there at the diggings will never be known, I'm afraid. For your father never came back."

" But, mother, dear, you don't suspect, do you, that father's death was an unnatural one ? " Joan interrogated.

Her mother closed the account book in which she had been making calculations.

" I cannot say," she answered. " I cannot tell. I know that he had found a great deal of gold. His was the richest claim of the season, and he was coming back for the winter. That was the last news I ever had from him. There was a rumour—just a rumour—that he had died of starvation on the trail. Your uncle, who was with him, explained nothing and never communicated with me to say where or how his brother died, or to send any of the gold that would have helped us so much."

" Shouldn't wonder any if he'd kept it all himself," conjectured Joan.

" If the money had come," continued Mrs. Medlicott, " it would at least have saved us from taking out a mortgage. The place is not really ours. All the profits have to go in paying the heavy interest to the lawyers in Ottawa. Even at the present time I am in terror of getting a demand for payments that are due."

" Well, but there are the cattle and horses," Joan reminded her. " You'll be having the round-up next week, and surely the lawyer will wait until the stock is sold."

" Ah ! but he is so harsh, so exacting," her mother complained. " If the money now due is not paid, he will foreclose, and we shall be turned out of house and home, perhaps without warning."

" Is it so bad as that ? "

Mrs. Medlicott stood up and walked towards the stove.

" We should have been all right if our horses had not been stolen last fall," she said. " But even the Mounted Police, with all their cleverness, have not been able to discover the thief." She paused. " I see you are making a birthday cake for Dannie," she observed. " What is detaining him, I wonder ? He should be back by now. I hope he hasn't come to grief with that new pony. And where is Percy ? They didn't go out together."

At the mention of Percy the Indian girl in the scullery paused in her cleaning of the knives, and stood listening.

" Oh, no one ever knows where Percy may be," Joan answered. " He may be anywhere but where there is honest work to be done."

Maple Leaf vigorously resumed her work, satisfied that they had not guessed where Percy Rapson had gone.

"Dan's comin' along the trail," Joan announced, glancing through the window, "and Percy and Sergeant Silk. I thought at first that it was Bob, but you c'n tell Sergeant Silk's seat on horseback anywhere. He's as straight as a larch tree. I expect Dan invited him for his birthday."

She went expectantly towards the door to look out. She regarded Sergeant Silk as her especial friend.

He raised his hat as he saw her.

"I mustn't forget that I have a letter for your mother, Dan," he said. "It was handed to me this morning by the post rider. She will get it hours earlier than if he'd delivered it himself."

"If it's from Ottawa, I hope you won't give it her," said Dan.

"Do you?" returned the sergeant. "But of course I'm bound to give it to her, wherever or whomever it's from. I can't let personal considerations come between me and my duty."

But when, a little while later, he handed the letter to Mrs. Medlicott, he regretted that his sense of duty had not permitted him to delay its delivery, if not altogether to suppress it.

As she took it and glanced apprehensively at the Ottawa post mark, her face went very white, and her hand trembled as she agitatedly tore open the envelope and drew forth its contents. When she read the typewritten letter her agitation increased, and she rose from her chair and went out of the room.

Joan followed her.

"Mother, what is it?" the girl cried.

Mrs. Medlicott thrust the disturbing letter into Joan's hand.

"It is just as I feared," she said in a hollow voice. "We are to be sold up if the money is not paid within a week. And it cannot be paid."

Dan Medlicott turned to Sergeant Silk as his mother left the room. They were alone together, except for Dan's younger sister Betty.

"Do you see what you've done?" Dan said gravely, almost accusingly. "You've spoilt my birthday. Mother won't smile again for weeks. You might have delayed givin' her that letter, at least for to-day."

Sergeant Silk was picking the dry mud from the rowel of one of his spurs. He did not speak when Dan paused.

"I knew what was in it," Dan went on. "That is, I'd made a good guess, 'fore you gave it her. You hadn't denied it was from Ottawa. You see, it's from Monson & Monson, the lawyers."

Silk looked up sharply.

"Lawyers?" he echoed. "Monstrous, extortionate money-lenders and harpies!"

"You know them, then?" inquired Dan, tying useless knots in a bit of string. Dan's fingers were never idle.

"Why, cert'nly!" nodded the sergeant. "One of the aims of my life is to keep the ranchers out of the coils of those people."

"Guess they've got my mother in their coils," Dan resumed. "They're worrying her t' pay interest on the mortgage and on the money that she has borrowed from them, an' by the way she was scared over that letter, I reckon they're goin' to drop down on us and take possession of Rattlesnake Ranch."

Sergeant Silk leant back in his chair and contemplated the stout timber beams of the ceiling.

"Why do you tell this to me?" he asked. "I never invited you to tell me."

Dan looked at him very straightly.

"Why do I tell you? Dunno. 'Cause I trust you, I suppose. Guess there's nothing I wouldn't tell you."

Sergeant Silk felt for his pipe. No one ever objected to his smoking. They liked him to make himself at home.

"Can nothing be done?" he questioned.

"Nothin'," Dan answered. "You see, it's a matter of two hundred pounds that have got to be paid."

Silk raised his eyebrows in surprise at the amount.

"I told you that there was a secret enemy workin' against us," Dan continued. "This is more of his doin'."

"Two hundred pounds!" Sergeant Silk meditatively repeated. "It's rather a big sum. Say, I wish I had two hundred pounds, I should——"

He stopped abruptly and leant over to knock the dust out of his pipe in the hollow of his hand. His alert hearing had caught a slight creaking sound on the staircase.

Percy Rapson, who had gone up to his room, was returning, and he now stood on the bottom stair, hesitating. He had heard the sergeant's last words, and a curious, sinister light gleamed in his bloodshot eyes as he entered the room. The knowledge that Sergeant Silk was in want of money seemed to afford him peculiar satisfaction.

He nursed that knowledge during the afternoon, and before tea-time, when Silk was helping Betty with her gardening, he strolled up to him; but, too nervous to speak, he only loitered near, smoking a cigarette.

When Betty went indoors for some flower-seeds, Sergeant Silk turned and faced him.

"Well? You have something you want to say to me," the officer suggested. "What is it? Are you repenting of the arrangement we made? If you would prefer to get the business over, you can, of course, give yourself up at any time."

"I confess that I should like to have done with it," Percy admitted. "At the worst I expect they'll let me off with a fine."

Sergeant Silk shook his head slowly, propping his chin on his hands, which were folded over the top of the rake he had been using.

"At the worst," he said, "you may have to undergo six months' hard labour. At the best you may get off with two months' imprisonment, without the option of a fine. The charge against you is that of illegally importing intoxicants into prohibited territory, and that is an offence which is always followed by a summary conviction."

"Imprisonment!" cried Percy in alarm. "And do you mean that it will get into the newspapers?"

"Why, cert'nly. They'll jump at a sensational tit-bit like that. They'll report the trial, sure: with display headlines, 'Son of an English Peer convicted of whisky-running,' and all the rest of it. Naturally, too, it will be quoted in the English Press. Dare say his lordship'll read it in *The Times* one morning."

The Honourable Percy tried to cover his extreme agitation by lighting a new cigarette. He even went so far as to offer one to Sergeant Silk, who politely rejected it.

"Look here, Sergeant, old man," Percy began to plead. "Don't let's have any rot. You know jolly well, or you ought to know, what this means to me, being had up by the police. My governor'll get into a most awful bate with me. He'll stop my allowance and threaten all sorts of things. My mater'll break her heart. My whole career'll be spoilt!"

"Exactly," agreed Silk. "It's a serious thing for you. But you might have reckoned on that a bit earlier, mightn't you—before you went rotting about at Hilton's Jump? If you hankered after excitement, I could have given you more than you'd ever get there among the Indians and half-breeds and such scum as Nosey Foster. I could give you excitement in helping the law instead of breaking it. I could make a man of you, instead of the—excuse my saying it—the ass that you've made of yourself."

Percy looked up at him.

"Won't you let me off?" he pleaded.

Sergeant Silk shook his head slowly. He was beginning to pity this aristocratic English boy. But his pity did not extend to the point of a breach of police duty.

"I have already made an entry of your arrest and the charge against you in my pocket-book," he answered. "And I never rub anything out. Of course, I'm exceedingly sorry about the whole business. I'd very much rather that it hadn't happened."

"Would you?" Percy seemed to find room for hope in the expression of regret. "But I don't see why it should go any further," he pursued. "You see, there's only Dan Medlicott and our two selves who know."

Sergeant Silk stroked his black moustache, but said nothing. Percy imagined that he was relenting, and he went a step nearer to him and said coaxingly, like a spoilt child:

"I say, Sergeant, look here. Let's fix it up. I overheard you—I couldn't help overhearing you say to Dan this afternoon that you wished you had a couple of hundred pounds. That's so, isn't it?"

"Well?" smiled Silk, guessing what was to follow. "A sergeant of the Mounted Police can't save a whole lot out of a dollar and a half a day. And supposing I do want a couple of hundred pounds, very much indeed. What then?"

Percy hesitated a few moments, and then stammered out:

"You shall have a cheque for that amount on the Toronto Bank before you leave Rattlesnake Ranch," he announced. "My credit's good for anything at that shop."

"I dare say," nodded Silk. "It would be rather better for you if it were limited."

Much to Percy's annoyance, Betty Medlicott came up just then.

"Here are the seeds, Sergeant," she said, "the little red ones are Virginia Stock. I'm goin' to put them along the edges. The black ones are nemophila—lovely blue flowers, the colour of our Joan's eyes. And you admire Joan's eyes, I know."

"All right, Betty. Let's sow them now," said Silk, "and maybe they'll be in bloom next time I come along."

The seeds were duly sown, Dan's birthday tea was over, Sergeant Silk had had his promised talk with the foreman concerning the best grounds for wheat and oats, and was preparing a final pipe before leaving to keep his appointment with Antoine.

"I shall have news of your brother Bob to-night," he said to Dan, who was alone with him for a few moments, Percy Rapson

having gone into another room. "Slip out of the house at ten o'clock and meet me near the white gate. I may want you."

Percy had not been absent long. When he returned, he went up to the sergeant and handed him a slip of paper. Silk needed only to glance at it to recognise that it was a bank cheque for two hundred pounds.

Very deliberately he folded it lengthwise and then again. Holding it between his fingers, he bent over and lighted it at the stove, applying the flame to his pipe.

"There are two sides to every bargain, Mr. Rapson," Silk said slowly. "I am fulfilling all the bargain that I have made with you by showing you what I think of your audacity in offering me a bribe."

He cast the remnant of the cheque into the stove, took up his hat, and strode towards the door. There he turned and looked back at the youth who was still his prisoner.

"Remember," he said, "that you have given me your parole."

Dan Medlicott followed him out into the moonlit night, intending to help him in getting his broncho from the stable.

Silk was walking very quickly and had disappeared by the path among the trees before Dan had got beyond the garden gate. His moccasined feet made no sound on the soft turf, but it would have been easy to track him by the strong flavour of the tobacco he was smoking.

Dan began to run, and in the middle of the belt of spruce trees saw him again, coming to an abrupt halt. The moon shone on his red coat and the yellow stripe of his trousers. Suddenly he bent over a low bush, and the next thing that Dan was aware of was the sergeant seizing a man by the throat.

"So, Josh Casterley," cried Sergeant Silk, "I have caught you again at your old tricks! Hands up!"

CHAPTER VI

CASTERLEY UNMASKED

"HANDS up!"

Sergeant Silk repeated the command in a voice so calm that he might have been merely requesting the man to make room for him to pass along the narrow woodland path, yet the tones compelled instant obedience.

Dan Medlicott saw Josh Casterley's doggedly obstinate face in the moonlight, and he thought it the most repulsively wicked human face that he had ever beheld. Very unwillingly the storekeeper raised his hands aloft, and from one of them Silk took a revolver.

"Guess you didn't anticipate seeing me around here, Josh, did you?" he questioned.

Casterley lowered his hands.

"You've got an inconvenient instinct for prowlin' around where you're least expected," he responded with a frown. "Say, you've dropped on a mare's nest this time, though. There's no secret trap-doors in this here plantation that I know of."

"Possibly not," returned Silk; "but wherever you are there's sure to be mischief brewing."

"You credit me with more'n I deserve, Sergeant," sneered Casterley. "I'm here on perfec'ly legitimate business. And I don't just take what you meant by sayin' that you'd caught me at my old tricks. What tricks? I've a right t' be here. An' if you're hankerin' to know why I'm here, I'll tell you."

"Well"—Silk returned his own revolver to the pouch at his belt—"you can tell me. I'm certainly some curious to know what should bring you spying around on Mrs. Medlicott's premises."

"Then listen," resumed Josh Casterley. "I came t' find out what has happened to young Rapson. You arrested him over there at Hilton's Jump. That was a bit of bluff on your part, I reckon, for you've nothing against him. You can't have.

Same time, you don't often make mistakes. You gen'rally know a heap more'n anybody else, and I wanted t' find out if you'd sure taken him into custody. Y'see, Sergeant, he owes me a few dollars, and I'm kind of anxious to know if I stand any chance of gettin' 'em 'fore he's gone out of the way, see ? Bein' as he's only a infant still in the eyes of the law——"

He broke off abruptly as Dan Medlicott approached into the moonlight.

"I allow you're about the last person in the world to let anybody get into your debt without your having a written acknowledgment," remarked Sergeant Silk, regardless of Dan's presence. "And you know as well as I do that you don't stand to lose a cent of what young Rapson owes you. No, Josh, you haven't given me the true reason of your being here. I know a much more likely one."

He turned to Dan Medlicott.

"Say, Dan," he said, "do you mind saddling up my pony for me while I'm having a private talk with Josh Casterley ? "

Puffing meditatively at his pipe, he waited until Dan was beyond hearing. Then he handed Casterley's revolver back to him.

"Listen to me," he began, speaking hardly above a whisper, but none the less firmly. "I know why you are here. You are having a quiet spy round this ranch, calculating what the property will be worth to you when it falls into your hands, as you intend it to fall when you have successfully stolen it by your trickery."

Casterley drew back, and his hand went to his hip pocket, where he had just thrust his revolver.

"No," cried Silk, "you needn't grip your gun that way. I've removed the cartridges. They're in my hand—six of 'em. Listen, Josh Casterley. I have known ever since I have been on this patrol that you are piling up money hand over hand. You are reckoned up as the richest man in Alberta. And yet anybody might see with half an eye that your wealth can't all come from the bit of land you pretend to cultivate, or from your grocery store across there at Hilton's Jump. Where, then, do you get it from ? "

He paused, keeping his gaze fixed upon Casterley's blinking eyes.

"You get it," he went on, "by wringing it out of the ranchers and poor settlers around here and all over Canada ; by enticing them to borrow from you on the security of their farms and

stock, and by charging them exorbitant interest on your loans. Oh, yes, you've kept your detestable usury business a very tight secret. But for months past I've known of the existence of your office in Ottawa that you run under the assumed name of Monson & Monson."

Casterley gave an uncomfortable little chuckle.

"There's nothin' illegal about my business in Ottawa," he protested with a sly smile.

"I am not so sure of that," retorted Silk. "You have made my friend Mrs. Medlicott your victim. Is there nothing illegal in the way you are grinding her down? Is there nothing illegal in your threat to turn her and her family out of house and home?"

"Nothing," Casterley answered. "I've got her own written agreement to pay. If she don't pay, I claim my legal security, and Rattlesnake Ranch and every blade of grass that grows on it belong to me. That's the position in a nutshell."

"I should like to examine that agreement," said Silk, conscious that Mrs. Medlicott had exceedingly little chance of escape from the disaster that was hanging over her.

"Sorry I can't oblige you, Sergeant," Casterley sniggered. "Guess you must just take my word for it that it's all 'cording t' law."

Sergeant Silk knocked out his pipe and pocketed it.

"Then you intend to foreclose and turn her out if the two hundred and odd pounds are not paid within a week?"

Casterley looked back at the officer in astonishment, evidently wondering how he knew so much.

"Yes," he answered lightly. "That's up against her, and I reckon she don't hold a hand that's any use to her beside what I hold over her."

Sergeant Silk was losing some of his customary calmness. He knew well that Josh Casterley was not the man to do things by halves.

"You double-distilled villain!" he cried. "Have you no mercy? Do you forget that she is a struggling widow?"

Josh shook his head resolutely.

"I've shown her all the mercy I c'n afford," he declared.

"Yet the law allows more," pursued Silk. "According to the law you are bound to give her six months' notice. You are giving her only a week."

"Steady, Sergeant, steady!" rejoined Casterley. "I ain't acting with my eyes shut. "Don't you think that. Mrs. Medli-

cott had due notice six months ago. I've added the other week out of merciful kindness, seein', as you say, she's a strugglin' widow, and beyond that week she's not goin' to have another hour, see ? "

" Yes," nodded the sergeant, " I see that it is useless to argue with you. You've made up your mind to do your worst. But I tell you this, Josh Casterley, that whatever you do, whatever happens, Mrs. Medlicott shall never be turned out of Rattlesnake Ranch."

Josh Casterley's mocking laugh followed him as he continued his way towards the stables, and, hearing it, Sergeant Silk felt that the mockery was deserved, for he had boasted without seriously reflecting that he was powerless to prevent the threatened calamity.

" That skunk Casterley has delayed me some," he said to Dan, who was waiting for him at the stable door with the saddled troop-horse. " You may as well come along with me right now to the white gate."

" I expect you've been tacklin' him about the stolen pony and the dog," said Dan, watching him as he strapped his folded blanket and cape and fixed his carbine in its proper place before starting. " Did he tell you anythin' about Bob ? "

" No." Silk slung the bridle-rein over his wrist and led his pony along the path towards the bridge.

" No," he repeated, " I guess Antoine will tell us more about Bob than we could get out of Casterley, and I don't want Casterley to know just yet that I've any suspicions as to where Bob is."

" Then you have some suspicions ? "

" Why, cert'nly. I was able to assure Mrs. Medlicott that he hadn't come to any serious harm. You noticed the soles of Antoine's boots, didn't you ? And you reckoned they were the same that made the impressions alongside the morass where we found Bob's old belt ? "

" Yes," Dan answered ; " but that didn't help me any to solve the riddle of Bob's disappearance."

" That's only because you don't know Antoine as well as I do, or as Trooper Medlicott knows him. If any harm had come to Bob, Antoine wouldn't have been singing love-songs in Casterley's grocery store. No ; you don't know Antoine. Say, you ought to. He'd teach you a lot about scouting and woodcraft. Next time you go on the lakes in your canoe you should take him with you. He combines in himself all the most admir-

able qualities of his Redskin ancestors without any of the vices, and all the vivacity and charm of the French settler I guess he's not far away now. I told him to be here about ten."

They went very silently through the orchard path, and when they neared the white gate Dan Medlicott said :

" Your man is not here."

" I think he is," Sergeant Silk declared, coming to a halt and looking about him searchingly in the darkness of the shadows cast by the moon. " I heard the clucking of a sage-hen as we came along, and no sage-hen in its ordinary senses would be strutting about at this time of night. Are you tired of waiting, Antoine ? "

" But no, *mon cher* sergeant," responded Antoine, appearing like a shadow from behind the stout gate-post. " I 'ave ver' good tam listen to de tree commence growin'. You see Josh Casterley 'long dere, I tink, eh ? "

" Yes. What's he up to, do you know ? "

Antoine shrugged his shoulders.

" Mischeef, you bet," he conjectured.

" Say, Antoine, what does he know about Trooper Medlicott ? " asked Silk.

Antoine glanced at Dan and then answered the officer.

" Nothing—absolutely. It is not intended dat he should know, you un'erstand."

" Ah, then Bob is safe somewhere," nodded Sergeant Silk. " Where is he, Antoine ? Dan here is anxious to know. So am I."

Antoine took out his tin tobacco box and cigarette papers.

" Is it permitted, that I smoke ? " he inquired.

" Why, cert'nly," said Silk. " Fire away."

Antoine rolled his cigarette very dexterously, and, having lighted it, returned the dead match to his pocket. Like most men of the prairie, he was careful about fire.

" Where is he ? " he began, resting an elbow on the top bar of the gate. " Oh, but he is discreet. He 'ave not tol' me where he would go. I not know. I no can tell. But certainly he is not in the swamp where you find his belt."

Sergeant Silk smiled.

" You have been there again, then, this afternoon ? " he said. " You found our footprints ? But how do you know that we fished out the belt ? "

The half-breed looked at the glowing end of his cigarette.

"Simply because de belt it was no longer dere when I search," answered. "No one else could 'ave take it. Wot you tink?"

"I think," said the sergeant, "that you may as well tell me ght now everything that you know about Bob Medlicott. hy did he part with his belt, anyhow? Why did he separate mself from his broncho and that dog?"

"Ah, but dat is precisely wot I expect you to tell me!" ied Antoine in surprise.

Then he proceeded to give an account of all he knew, which id not amount to very much. In Dan's opinion, indeed, while relieved him of his main anxiety, it only added to the mystery oncerning Bob's absence.

It seemed that, seven days before this, Antoine and Trooper Bob Medlicott had met by chance on the Bow River trail, and they had ridden in company for some miles. When they were passing through a rocky gorge among the wooded hills the trooper inquired of the half-breed what was in the parcel that he carried across his saddle. Antoine informed him that it was a second-hand suit of clothes which he had just bought at Banff.

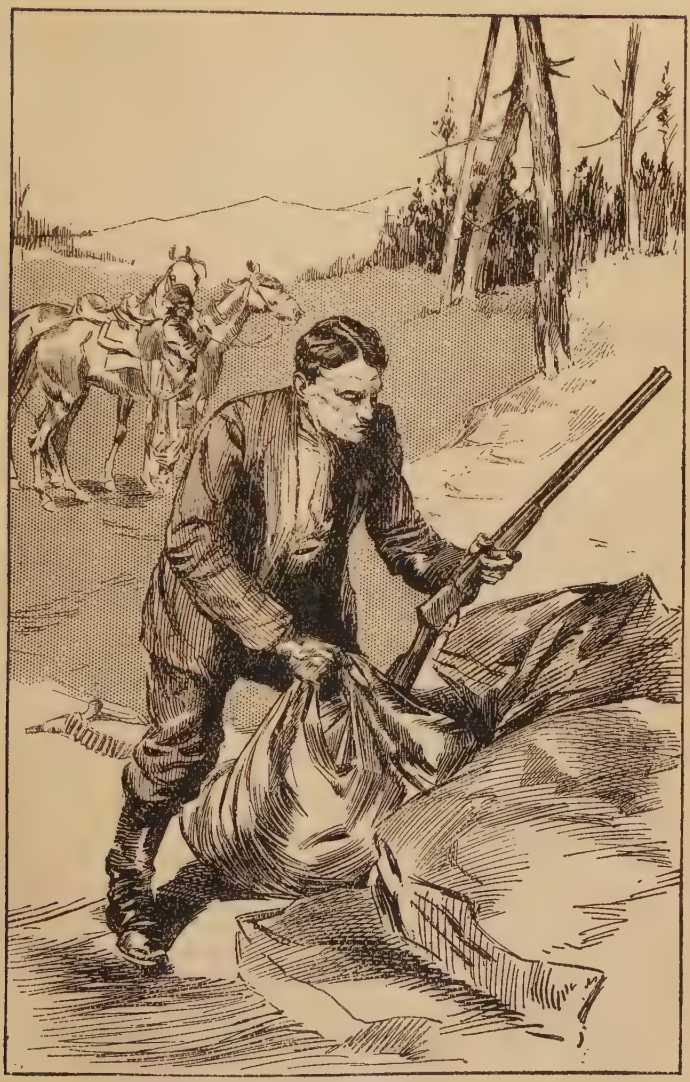
Bob Medlicott thereupon asked to see the clothes, and on the parcel being opened he offered to buy the garments at a higher price than Antoine had paid for them, on condition that they fitted him. He had dismounted, and there and then he took off his uniform and tried them on, even to the boots. He was satisfied, and paid over the money.

To the surprise of Antoine, Bob then folded up his police uniform into a bundle, keeping back only his belt, with its cartridges and revolver, and a few things which he had taken from his pockets. Then he selected a place among the rocks, and carefully hid the parcel, together with his blanket and carbine.

Without explaining the reason of his curious proceeding, Bob further requested the half-breed to exchange horses with him. Antoine obeyed, but before he mounted the troop-horse Bob Medlicott removed its saddle and bridle, which he also concealed among the rocks.

Disguised almost beyond recognition, Bob mounted the half-breed's pony, while Antoine got astride of the now barebacked broncho. They rode thus for a few miles farther, followed by Bob's dog.

Trooper Medlicott had not shaved for two days, he roughened his hair, and in assuming the plainsman's dress he had cast off all the soldierly smartness of the mounted policeman. He



Bob folded up his police uniform into a bundle, and hid the parcel among the rocks.

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asked Antoine if he thought anyone would now know him for one of the Riders of the Plains.

Antoine reminded him of his brown leather belt, whereupon Bob took it off, emptied it of its cartridges, pocketed the revolver, and handed the belt to the half-breed, telling him to do away with it, and at the same time bidding him say nothing to anyone unless to a member of the force, or unless he, Bob, failed to return to Rattlesnake Ranch within fourteen days.

"Seems as if your brother had fixed on an original idea for spending his fortnight's furlough," reflected Sergeant Silk, turning to Dan as Antoine came to a pause.

"But he'd promised to help us with the ploughing and the round-up," said Dan. "It's queer of him to do a thing like this. I don't understand."

"Does Bob happen to know about that mortgage business?" inquired Silk.

"Of course he does," Dan answered. "Mother told him everythin'."

"Ah, then," decided the sergeant, "I guess he concludes that there isn't much use in doing any ploughing or rounding-up of cattle and horses. Even your mother's foreman, Dave Morrison, isn't hustling himself any, knowing that every seed of corn that is set will only ripen for the benefit of Monson & Monson."

Dan turned to Antoine.

"Say, Antoine," he said, "how did you let Josh Casterley get hold of my brother's broncho?"

Antoine dropped his cigarette and stamped on it.

"He take it from me," he answered. "I owe heem money, you un'erstand. He take de pony for pay de debt."

"I see," reflected Dan. "And he didn't steal it, after all. Seems Josh Casterley isn't such an out-and-out bad lot as I thought."

"Ha, you not know heem!" laughed Antoine. "You not know Josh Casterley one leetle bit!"

"No," added Sergeant Silk, flinging himself into his saddle, "and nobody else does quite." He leant over and held out his hand. "Good night, Dan," he said. "Dare say we shall meet again sooner'n you expect."

CHAPTER VII

THE ROUND-UP

Percy Rapson had an extraordinary belief in the power of wealth to overcome all difficulties. He believed that no man who was not himself rich, and much less a poor sergeant of police who was professedly in need of money, could resist the temptation of accepting so respectable a sum as two hundred pounds as a recompense for doing so little as he wished Sergeant Silk to do for him. He argued that it would cost Silk nothing and cause him no trouble or disgrace merely to obliterate a record in his notebook.

How should it ?

No one in authority knew of the arrest. The men in Casterley's saloon had witnessed it, indeed ; but none of them knew with certainty what it was for, and even if they did know they were not the sort of men to go out of their way to interfere if Silk should let his prisoner go free, as he had full power to do.

No harm would be done to anybody ; whereas if the matter were to go any further, and if he, Percy Rapson, should be brought up for trial and committed to prison, the disgrace would be horrible—so horrible that two hundred pounds seemed quite a small sum of money to offer as the price of liberty and silence.

So Percy had written out the cheque for two hundred pounds, confident that it would be gladly accepted, and that its acceptance would mean that he would hear no more of the painful business. But how little he understood the high standard of honour which distinguishes the North-West Mounted Police !

He had handed the slip of paper to Sergeant Silk with an air of lordly generosity, as he might have handed a tip to a railway porter at home in England, and when Sergeant Silk coolly folded it into a spill with which to light his pipe, Percy's indignation at what he considered the insult was so great that he could almost have dared to strike the red-coated officer over the face.

But his indignation quickly subsided under the calm dignity

and contempt with which Sergeant Silk rejected the bribe, and with a sense of shame he realised that he had made a false step. He had not courage even to speak, much less to show open resentment.

"Remember that you have given me your parole," Sergeant Silk had said as he went out into the moonlight, and the words rankled until long after he had disappeared.

"I don't care," declared Percy; "I don't care twopence whether I've given you my parole or not. I'm not going to keep it. Why should I? I shall go off the ranch if I like, without asking any policeman. I shall go now, this very night, and every night. And, since Silk hasn't taken that bribe, as he impertinently called it, I've still two hundred quid more than I thought I had."

In thus defying Sergeant Silk, he fancied that he was acting very courageously. Whether he was of the same opinion after a week of reckless gambling at Hilton's Jump is another matter. Certain it is that by the end of that time he had lost considerably more than two hundred pounds, and had worked himself into such a condition of nervous irritability that no one on Rattlesnake Ranch could fail to notice the marked change in him.

That week was a busy one at Rattlesnake Ranch.

Mrs. Medlicott had not yet given way to utter despair, and, notwithstanding that she knew that the threat contained in the Ottawa letter would be carried out, she nevertheless pressed forward the usual occupations of the farm, and allowed no one to be idle.

Dan was out early the next morning at the ploughing and harrowing, and even Percy Rapson made a pretence of helping.

While the tilling was still in progress, the spring round-up was begun, and the cattle and horses that had been roaming all the winter on the prairie pastures were collected. All the ranchers of the district were interested in this important work, and quite an army of them assembled on the appointed day in Farrow's Coulee, to range the vast pastures under the direction of a chosen captain.

The company from Rattlesnake Ranch included Dave Morrison, Tom Woodruff, The Moose, Rippling Water, Percy Rapson, and Dan Medlicott, and they rode out at daybreak, each provided with a lasso on the horn of his stock saddle. In the coul there was an encampment of prairie waggons, with fires implements for branding in the corrals.

When the representatives of the various ranches were all duly mustered, the captain of the round-up divided them into parties, and sent them out in many directions on their quest after the wandering live stock.

There were low hills all around, and the riders went up to them, scattered out, searching all the little hollows and water-courses for miles, bunching such cattle as they found and driving them to the range. All calves found running with a cow belonged by recognised right to her owner, and each of them was roped and branded with the owner's registered brand, burnt with a red-hot iron.

When all that could be found were at last rounded up into a vast herd, there was the serious business of cutting them out and separating them according to ownership, either to be taken to market or else to be allowed again to range the prairie and get fattened up for the later beef round-up.

Mrs. Medlicott's herd was to be sold, for the mistress of Rattlesnake Ranch was in need of money, apart from what was owing to Monson & Monson, and she wished to realise on her stock. Her foreman was greatly puzzled when he came to count the cattle that bore the brand of her ownership.

"Can't just make it out," he remarked to his companions. "How does it come about that so many of our cows are without calves? Seems to me thar's been some rustlin' goin' on. Never seen so few."

"Looks as if the coyotes and wolves had been busy," said Rippling Water.

"I've been lookin' for that cow with the white patch on her side that Joan's so fond of," added Dan. "But I've not seen her yet."

"An' where's that little Jersey that missis bought at Thornton's sale last fall?" questioned Tom Woodruff. "Reckon you're right, Dave; thar's bin some rustlin'."

"Josh Casterley's little lot seems all right." Dave replied. "An' his gen'rally range alongside of ours. That's some queer, ain't it? Why should ours be the only bunch that's short?"

Casterley's branding pens were next to those of the Rattlesnake herd. Rippling Water touched Dan Medlicott's arm.

"Come along o' me," he said.

He picked out a particular cow which bore Mrs. Medlicott's brand very plainly on her white hide, and drove her quietly out the gate of Casterley's pens. The gate was opened and she in, unobserved by any of Casterley's cowboys.

"Now you keep your eye on her, an' see what happens," said Rip.

Dan watched, and saw the cow moving aimlessly in the throng; but presently she went up to a lonely calf, and the calf claimed its lost mother instantly.

"Guess thar's a lot more like that," said Rip. "That's where the rustlin' has been."

Dan reported the incident to the captain of the round-up. The calf was restored to its rightful owners, and Josh Casterley was called upon to explain. His only explanation, however, was that it was just an accident. The silly calf hadn't known its own mother and had gone in with a strange cow.

If the round-up of the cattle was unsatisfactory, the horse round-up which followed was even more so. Of the seventy ponies sent out to range from Rattlesnake Ranch only fifteen were found, and there was not a single foal that could be claimed.

Dan Medlicott thought that the missing animals might have strayed farther away among the hills, but the foreman shook his head.

"Seems as if they'd vamoosed in search of the other lot that were stolen last winter," he said. "Thar's not a bit of use lookin' for 'em. They're lost, sure."

"Don't know about that," said Dan. "I've got an idea they might be found, and I guess I'm goin' to find 'em." He glanced at Rippling Water. "You feel like comin' along o' me, Rip?" he asked.

"Sure," nodded Rip. "Right now, if that's your notion."

It was not Dan's notion to start immediately, for the journey he intended to take required some preparation, and he wished to take a more suitable horse than the one that he was now riding. Gipsy was the horse that he wanted. She was accustomed to the mountainous country, and was well shod.

"No," he answered. "We'll start at sunrise to-morrow mornin'."

On the following morning accordingly they were galloping together towards the foothills.

"And now that we're on our way, pr'aps you'll let me know somethin' 'bout your idea," suggested Rip. "You've been holdin' it pretty tight so far. Ain't I entitled to know?"

"I supposed you'd guess," laughed Dan.

Rippling Water said:

"Oh, that means that you don't know a whole lot more'n I do myself. You've kind of figgered it out from what we saw

that time when we were campin' out alongside of Red Deer Creek. Well, I allow that's somethin'. That big trail wasn't there by accident. Guess if we'd followed it up we should have found a few stolen ponies back of the gulch where we killed the wolf."

"Sure," nodded Dan. "We ought to have put the Mounted Police on that trail."

"Don't know why you didn't," said Rip. "Thought you'd told your brother."

"So I did," returned Dan; "but Bob guessed it was only an old Indian trail we'd seen."

"Bob guessed wrong," rejoined Rip. "Anyway, your idea's the same as mine, and I ain't sorry we've brought our guns. We may need them."

All through the morning they rode. At noon they rested. Until dusk they went to and fro, seeking for fording-places across flooded streams, finding their way through dark forest glades, climbing steep mountain-sides, and descending into gloomy passes where it seemed that the foot of man had never trod, and at night they hobbled their ponies and wrapped themselves in their blankets utterly weary and disappointed, for they had found not a trace of any strange horse, and they were forced to own themselves defeated in their quest.

At moonrise their fire was out, and they were sound asleep under the giant pine trees.

Suddenly Dan Medlicott awakened with a start. Rippling Water was sitting up with his revolver held across his left arm. His eyes glistened in the moonlight.

"Hush!" he muttered, knowing that Dan was awake. "Don't move. It's that dog. It's comin' this way, see? The dog that we saw followin' the stolen broncho."

Dan cautiously turned his gaze in the direction in which Rip's revolver was pointing.

"Don't shoot!" he whispered. "Let it come."

The brown retriever approached them with its muzzle to the ground. It came up and sniffed at their feet, then went away.

"Quick!" cried Dan. "Let's go after it!"

They bundled up their blankets, loosened their ponies, and mounted. The dog turned and looked back at them, then went off at a sharp, loping trot. They followed. It led them out from among the trees and over the shoulder of a low hill. On the ridge of the hill it waited. Dan went up to it.

Beyond him there stretched a wide, fertile valley flooded with

moonlight, and in the valley he could see, hardly half a mile away from him, an immense corral surrounded by a high palisade and thronged with horses.

"Do you see, Rip?" Dan exclaimed, as Rippling Water drew up beside him. "Do you see that crowd of ponies? Where've they come from? Whose are they, anyhow?"

"Hush! Listen!" whispered Rip, glancing round. "Somebody's behind us, followin' on our track. Guess that dog's led us into a trap."

They both wheeled round to confront the intruder, with the light of the moon upon them. Dan could see the figure of a mounted cowboy half hidden behind a clump of bushes. He took out his revolver. Then from beyond the bushes there came a voice, hailing him:

"Dan!" it called.

Dan urged his pony forward. The cowboy came out to meet him, and Dan stared at him in astonishment, knowing him through his disguise.

"Silk!" he cried. "Sergeant Silk!"

CHAPTER VIII

THE MAN ON THE BRIDGE

Sergeant Silk drew to an abrupt halt in front of the two boys.

"Yes," he said lightly, "I see you recognise me, in spite of these togs I'm wearing. You seem some surprised, Dannie. But my being here is quite a matter of course. It's your own coming to an out-of-the-way place like Dead Lodge Valley that's the surprising thing. How did you find your way, you two? There's no trail. You might have got lost, easily, and you'd never have been found."

Dan glanced aside at Rippling Water.

"I told you that Rip's a good tracker," he responded, giving all credit to his companion. "He's Indian, you know. He'd find his way anywhere."

He noticed now that Silk still wore his military trousers, with their broad yellow stripe, under a pair of cowboy shaps, and that as he opened the front of his buckskin coat to put away his revolver, he disclosed for an instant the red jacket of his police uniform.

"I suppose you thought you'd do a bit of police work on your own account, did you?" the officer smiled. "You hadn't much faith in the Force. But you see, we're here in front of you."

"Are you here on duty, then?" Dan questioned. He nodded his head in the direction of the moonlit valley. "Say, have you come to scout around after those stolen ponies?"

"Why, cert'nly; if they are indeed stolen. There's a rare big bunch of them down there. I haven't been close up to them yet, though, to see how they're branded. I'm hanging round until daybreak. If I'd thought you'd come, I should have invited you. Didn't think you'd care for a picnic like this. I'm glad you've turned up, though, now you're here. You may help. And, perhaps, you've brought some grub in your saddle-bags, eh? A hungry coyote took a fancy to mine and wolfed it while I wasn't looking."

"We've got heaps," Dan Medlicott assured him, reaching for his saddle-bag. "Would you like some now?"

Silk shook his head.

"No," he answered. "I'd a good feed before the coyote came along. It's Antoine who needs it. It was his share that fell to the coyote, and I'm anxious to make it up."

"Antoine? He is with you?"

Silk signed with his thumb over his shoulder.

"Yes. He's back there in the timber. We were both having a snooze when you wakened us, following, not very quietly, I must say, on the track of Old Chunk, who was supposed to be on sentry duty and wasn't. Antoine reckoned you were a pair of horse thieves. Lucky he didn't open fire on you. He's a dead sure shot."

He twitched at his bridle-rein.

"Say, you'd best come into camp," he added. "We can do nothing before daylight. The moon'll have dropped behind Minnewanka Peak inside another half-hour."

He led them among the bushes into the shadows of the trees, where in a dip in the ground surrounded by scrub they discovered Antoine waiting beside a small clear fire of chips, so skilfully shielded that neither smoke nor flame could have been detected from behind the belt of trees.

Even before they had loosened their cinchas and hobbled their two bronchos, Sergeant Silk had curled himself up in his blanket and was fast asleep. Dan and Rip presently followed his example, leaving Antoine on watch with a supply of food.

Dawn was breaking over the snow-capped mountains when Dan awoke with the flavour of hot coffee in his nostrils. Antoine was smothering the fire; Rippling Water was at work with the four ponies, and was ready waiting for Dan's blanket. At the edge of the hollow Sergeant Silk lay at full length along the ground, looking down into the valley, watching the horse corrals. Dan went up to him and flung himself beside him.

"Can you see anythin', Sergeant?" he inquired.

"Not much," said Silk. "It's not light enough yet. But there's a chap moving around over there has just lighted his pipe. Guess he's been on the watch all night. Good thing he didn't get scent of our fire; but the wind's the other way. Can you make him out, just beyond that clump of trees? He's mounted on a pony with a white blaze up its face. There, look along the barrel of my carbine. It's covering him."

Dan looked for a long time, but had to admit that he saw nothing in the shape of a man.

"You've got wonderful eyesight, Sergeant," he said, drawing back.

"Guess it's only that it's well trained," said Silk. "Go and get some breakfast. It'll be fuller daylight by the time you've had it. Then we'll make a start."

Dan was not long in getting a drink of hot coffee and a chunk of bread and cold bacon, and when he returned to the sergeant's side there was already a faint rosy glow on the snowy peaks of the higher mountains.

"What's your notion?" Dan asked.

Sergeant Silk rose to his feet and unbuttoned his leather coat.

"Just to ride down there and have a jaw with that man," he answered, "and ask him the nearest way to Ghost Pine Creek. Can you see him? He's riding this way, now. That's all the better. We can interview him without being seen by his mates away back there in their bunk-house."

He strode up to his broncho, and before mounting, divested himself of his disguising buckskins and shaps. Dan noticed that he had already shaved, and reflected that he must have performed this operation of toilet in the dark. He now combed his hair and moustache, gave a dust to his uniform, adjusted his Stetson hat, buckled his spurs, and was once more the smart and soldierly officer of the Mounted Police.

When all four of them were in the saddle, he looked around to see that they were leaving nothing behind.

"Say, Antoine, I haven't seen Old Chunk this morning," he said. "Where is she? She doesn't seem able to make up her mind whether to attach herself to our outfit or not. Queerest dog I ever encountered."

Antoine had not seen her either, but Rippling Water informed the sergeant that he had seen her in the dawn light about a mile away down the valley, loping along with her nose to the ground, as if she were following on the scent of some beast or bird.

Silk led the way through the trees and round the shoulder of a low hill, which effectually shielded him from possible discovery by anyone in the valley; but beyond the hill he turned into a wooded ravine, through which a turbulent stream, swollen with melting snow from the mountains, swirled noisily downward over its bed of rough boulders. His three companions followed him in Indian file.

The ravine opened out, as he had expected, into Dead Lodge

Valley, and he halted as he came again within sight of the distant corrals.

"You're reckoned good at scouting, Rip," he said, glancing at the Indian boy. "Suppose you dismount and find out what can be seen of that rascally horse thief. We ought to have come out pretty well on top of him if he hasn't turned back."

Rippling Water slipped down from his saddle and crept forward as silently and cautiously as a brave on the war trail. He disappeared among the rocks and trees, but revealed himself again crawling up to the ridge of a hillock and concealing himself behind a clump of birch saplings, through which he seemed to be taking a survey of the hill-side beyond. He looked back up the ravine and waved his hand, then pointed downward in front of him to indicate that the man he was tracking was close to him.

Sergeant Silk then rode on, accompanied by Dan Medlicott, while Antoine followed at some distance behind, leading Rip's pony.

What they saw when they emerged from the ravine was the man they sought, stationed on the middle of a timber-built bridge that spanned the stream. His back was towards them, and he was looking searchingly across the valley to the crowded corrals, with his left hand shielding his eyes from the glare of the rising sun.

"Come along, Dan," said Silk. "We'll give that chap a surprise. He won't hear us, because of the roaring of the water under the bridge. Say, he's a rough-looking customer, isn't he? I guess he's one of the boss thief's pet bullies. Your gun's loaded, I hope."

It was not until Sergeant Silk was within a score of yards of him that the man turned, and then it was not with alarm or even, apparently, with surprise. He wheeled round his broncho, came off the bridge, and waited there with a dirty, work-worn hand raised to his cowboy's fur cap in respectful salute.

Silk returned the salute, and, to Dan's surprise, rode up to the stranger and shook hands with him. Equally to Dan's surprise he now saw that the cowboy was attended by a dog, and that the dog was none other than Old Chunk.

Riding nearer, he gazed into the cowboy's grimy face with its stubble of beard.

"It's Bob!" he cried. "It's my brother Bob! Mother's been frettin' so for you," he added.

"She needn't have fretted any," returned Bob. "She might

have known I was all right. And it's mostly on her account that I'm here. See those horses yonder, in the corrals ? They're all stolen, every one of them ; and a good half of them are hers." He turned to Sergeant Silk. " This is Casterley's doing," he said.

" What ? " cried Silk in astonishment. " Josh Casterley, of Hilton's Jump ? Say, I'd no idea he'd anything to do with horses ! How did you get on his track ? "

" Well," explained Bob, " I'd suspected him for a while back, but couldn't get at the truth officially as a trooper, so I tried a trick. I heard he was in want of hands, so I got myself up in these togs as a hobo ; I disguised myself, and went one day to his ranch near Hilton's Jump, and asked him for a job, told him I could cook a bit, and do chores, and he took me on. At the end of a couple of days he told me it wasn't at the ranch he wanted me. He'd a job for me somewhere else.

" That's what I'd expected and hoped for. And the next day I was brought along here to these secret corrals, and I've been here ever since, doing as I've been told, helping in the branding of stolen stock, herding them, keeping watch that no stranger should ever discover where they'd been spirited off to ; and all the time gathering evidence against Casterley."

" I see," nodded Sergeant Silk. " And how long was this going to last ? When did you comtemplate turning on him and arresting him ? And how were you going to manage without help ? "

Trooper Medlicott looked up at his superior inquiringly.

" Haven't you missed me ? Haven't you been searching for me ? Hasn't the dog led you here ? If you hadn't come, I should have gone and fetched you. But you've come. And just in time. Casterley is here. He's across yonder in the bunk-house. This very morning he intends to drive a bunch of bronchos to Radnor and send them east by train. They'll cross by this bridge, or try to. I guess you'll be here to stop them."

" Why, cert'nly," nodded Silk. " How many men has he ? "

" Twenty-eight. But some will stay behind."

" Right ! " said Silk. " We shall be here. You'd best get back now, and hustle things along."

Trooper Medlicott saluted and rode off at a hand gallop, and Sergeant Silk led his three companions back into ambush.

" Dannie, my boy," he smiled, " I guess Mrs. Medlicott's not going to be turned out of Rattlesnake Ranch, after all."

CHAPTER IX

HELD AT BAY

It was at about seven o'clock in the morning that Rippling Water, having been out on the watch for two hours, strode up the ravine to where Sergeant Silk sat with his back against a mossy boulder quietly smoking.

"They're comin' now, Sergeant," he reported. "They're drivin' a bunch of a hundred ponies. Josh Casterley is ridin' in front, Trooper Medlicott's hehind him, an' there's twenty other men besides. One of them is Soaring Eagle, and another Medicine Pipe-Stem."

"Ah, Indians, eh?" nodded Silk. "That accounts for a good deal. They could teach Josh a thing or two about horse stealing. Antoine, are you ready? Ride down with the two boys and be handy if you're needed to do some shooting. But don't show yourselves, mind you, until you see me go up to the bridge, savee?"

Antoine, Dan, and Rip led their ponies down to the open, where they mounted. They could hear the tramping of many hoofs and the shrill whistles of the cowboys as they kept the horses in an orderly procession with their loud cracking whips.

Rip led the way round into the shelter of a group of birch trees, where, without being themselves seen, they could watch all that went on and be ready to ride out if their help should be needed.

The position which they took up was directly opposite the end of the bridge. It was a stoutly-built bridge, supported in the middle by a rough stone pier, and wide enough to admit three riders abreast.

As soon as the horses came in sight, Dan Medlicott recognised one after another of them as belonging to Rattlesnake Ranch, and he also recognised one or two of the men whom he had seen in Casterley's store at Hilton's Jump.

Casterley seemed to anticipate some trouble in getting the

horses to cross the bridge with the stream surging noisily beneath it, and he was ordering certain of his men to rank themselves on either side to force the animals on between the rails, when suddenly he caught sight of a dog standing as if on guard in the footway.

"Here, where does that dog come from?" he cried angrily. "I've seen it before somewhere. Clear it out of that, one of you. Chuck it over into the creek. I'll have no dogs here. Drown it or shoot it, one of the two."

"Oh, that dog's all right, boss," objected one of the cowboys. "That's my dog, an' nobody's goin' ter touch it while I'm here."

He advanced towards the bridge and raised himself in his stirrups to glance across and see if there were any signs of Sergeant Silk's red jacket. "Stan' aside, Chunk!" he called, addressing the dog.

The dog remained in occupation of the bridge.

Casterley put his hand to his holster.

"I'll soon shoot the brute!" he muttered.

But instantly Bob Medlicott, having brought their two horses side by side, gripped his arm in his strong fingers, holding it as in a vice, while he drew his own revolver.

Sergeant Silk was by this time crossing the bridge, sitting very upright in his saddle and looking distinguished in his smart uniform. He rode up to Casterley's other side.

"Keep a hold of him, Bob!" he commanded, taking out a pair of handcuffs. "So you have added horse-stealing to your other crimes, have you, Josh? Well, you're caught red-handed this time!"

Casterley struggled to free himself and tried to fling himself from his saddle; but both of the constables had hold of him now, and before he could do anything the handcuffs were clasped about his wrists and he was secured.

"Take him across the bridge," ordered Silk.

Bob Medlicott seized the bridle of Casterley's broncho and was leading him over when Josh again began to struggle.

"Now, boys!" he shouted aloud.

His cowboys outnumbered his captors many times over, and they were too much in his power to disregard his call for help. They were determined to get him out of the law's clutches. So, as Trooper Medlicott dragged him over the bridge, there was an answering shout of "Now, boys!" and on came the crowd in a fierce rush.

Knives and revolvers flashed out quickly in their hands, and it looked as if the Police were going to have trouble.

As Sergeant Silk glanced back over his shoulder to see Antoine, Dan, and Rip riding up to the prisoner, there was a shot, and a bullet whistled past his right ear. He turned in an instant and saw one of the foremost of the toughs lowering his smoking revolver.

"That was you, Nosey Foster!" he called out. "You've done for yourself by that."

Nosey Foster gave a mocking laugh.

"Come along, boys!" he cried. "Down him! Down him! We all owe him a grudge."

There was a yell from the angry mob, and they made another rush for the bridge.

Sergeant Silk faced them as calmly as if they were the most peaceful, law-abiding men, instead of the most reckless desperadoes in all Alberta. But there was a gleam of alertness in his eye as he watched every movement of the throng, and the twitching of his finger on the trigger of his revolver showed that he was ready for any emergency.

"Stand back!" he commanded, in a firm, penetrating voice. "Put away those guns. The first man who attempts to cross this bridge will be shot."

The crowd hesitated and hung back before the grim determined figure confronting them. There was an angry snarl, and the restlessness of their horses betrayed that they were being kept back by hard grips. Every cowboy among them knew that Sergeant Silk was a man of his word, and that it meant certain death to him who dared to make the first disobedient move.

Many revolvers were out, many knives flashed in the sunlight. But as the soldier-policeman's weapon was pointed menacingly from face to face in turn, each gun and knife was sullenly put out of sight, and no shot was fired.

Silk then slowly lowered his hand.

"And now," he said sternly, "I guess I know most of you chaps by sight, and I've got all your names, anyway. You're not going to escape. Nosey Foster, you're one of the ringleaders of this gang. You'll go along with Josh Casterley as my prisoner, see? Hand over your gun, and then get to the far side of the bridge."

Nosey drew his horse back a few steps, and his hand went to his revolver, while his evil eyes watched for an opportunity.

"No, you don't," said the officer very quietly, seeing the man's intention. "You're covered. Hands up!"

Nosey meekly raised his empty fists above his head, and Sergeant Silk, going up to him, coolly took possession of his revolver and knife, signing to him to cross the bridge.

Silk then looked towards the two Indians.

"And you, too, Soaring Eagle," he added.

He fixed his gaze for a moment on Medicine Pipe-Stem also; and the Redskin, without being requested, drew his knife, and, taking it by the blade, held it forth.

Sergeant Silk glanced at the knife and then up at its owner.

"No," he said. "Medicine Pipe-Stem is foolish; but he is not a coward. His tongue is not crooked. He will keep his knife."

He turned swiftly from the Indian and faced the crowd of cowboys.

"As for the rest of you," he said, "you'll have the job of looking after the stock until the stolen property can be restored to its owners. And you can begin right now by driving this bunch back into the corrals. They're not going away to-day."

He watched them as they turned to do his bidding.

"Gustave!" he called sharply to one of them.

The half-breed looked round guiltily.

"There's one of those bronchos in front of you has a nasty scar on its pastern. Just see that it's doctored, will you?"

"Yes, sir," returned Gustave, politely saluting.

Medicine Pipe-Stem was following the herd; but Silk called him back.

"Wait!" he said, dismounting. He went up to the Indian's horse and examined it critically, feeling its legs, looking at its feet. "Did you choose this pony yourself?" he asked, glancing upward into the Indian's inscrutable face.

Medicine Pipe-Stem gave a grunt, which meant "Yes," and added:

"Heap good."

"Yes, so I see," nodded Silk. "Last time I saw her, your friend The Moose That Walks won a jolly fine race with her. Guess he'd like to have her back."

He stood up and put his hand to one of his breast pockets.

"You like to ride her home, Rattlesnake Ranch, quick?" he asked.

Again the Indian grunted and his eyes brightened.

"Quick as the chinook wind," he signified.

Sergeant Silk took out his pocket-book and pencil.

"Good," he nodded. "I write. Give Medicine Pipe-Stem a letter. He will give it into the hand of The Moose That Walks."

"Moose, he no savee," objected the Indian. "He no can read."

"Exactly," smiled Silk; "but he'll take it to someone who can. Dave Morrison, likely. That's what I want. Wait!"

He strode to the bridge, and tearing a leaf out of his pocket-book, wrote very quickly a message to Mrs. Medlicott's foreman, bidding him come at once with as many of his ranchmen as possible to where Pipe-Stem would lead him, adding briefly the news of the finding of Bob Medlicott and the discovery of the stolen horses. Folding the note, he went back to the Indian and carefully concealed the letter in one of his mocassins.

"Now," he said. "You go. After one sleep you are back here with many men, many horses."

Medicine Pipe-Stem's hand came forth slowly from under his blanket and Sergeant Silk took it in his own, knowing that by doing so he had won a devotion and loyalty which would never be broken.

It was clear to Sergeant Silk that without the help which he had thus sent for he could not hope to deal successfully with his present responsibilities. There were between three and four hundred horses to attend to. They could not be neglected; and Casterley's men were not likely to work for him with any degree of willingness. There were twenty-eight cowboys under arrest, each one of them a hardened reprobate, who would not scruple to put a knife into him if he had the chance.

There were other considerations also.

Bob Medlicott, who had gone amongst them in disguise, and who had brought about their downfall, was not likely to escape their enmity; while Antoine, known to them all with his guitar and his love-songs at Hilton's Jump, was in their eyes little more than a traitor, deserving swift vengeance. Both Bob and Antoine had, therefore, to be protected. For himself, Sergeant Silk had no anxiety. To him, life meant little more than doing his duty and riding about on the lonely patrols of the North-West, with the fear of God in his heart and the law of the land across his saddle.

If he had been asked, he would have denied that he had any personal power over men, and whenever he quelled a riot or subdued the wild anger of a gang of horse thieves, he attributed it all to the magical influence of his uniform, to his being a part of the great machine of Order, the servant of Justice.

What he thought most of now was not danger from these ruffians, but merely the practical difficulty of keeping them under quiet control until help should come, and he knew that if that help did not come quickly, they would certainly get out of hand.

To guard against this probability, he decided to keep Josh Casterley, Nosey Foster, and Soaring Eagle close prisoners, and he selected as their temporary prison a stoutly-built block-house by the gate of one of the corrals.

As they were being taken there, the cowboys were driving some of the horses in through the gate, and during the delay in getting past, Josh Casterley contrived to attract the attention of one of his men, who drew up to his side. Josh spoke hardly above a whisper, but Dan Medlicott, who stood near him, had sharp ears, and heard every word that was said.

"We're not done for yet, George," said Josh with a cunning leer in his blinking eyes. "We can get the better of that red-coated varmint if you chaps are game. Yes, and lay hold of all the stock into the bargain."

"What're we to do?" inquired George, glancing about him nervously.

Casterley drew him nearer.

"Wait until it's dark," he said, "then bring half-a-dozen of the boys along here on the quiet and get us out o' the block-house, see? If there's anyone on guard, give him a knock on the head, no matter who it is. And then we'll do for Silk and get quit of him once and for all. Nobody knows where he is. They'll never look for him here. Even if they do, we shall all have bunked. D'ye twig? An hour after sundown, then."

He pushed the man from him as Sergeant Silk approached.

Dan Medlicott slipped away and followed George into the corral.

"Say, I heard what Josh Casterley said to you just now," he declared boldly.

George gave a hitch to his leggings.

"Did you? Well, you don't reckon I'm goin' ter take any notice of it, do you? Not likely. You needn't worry any. Say, thar's a good few of us boys are real glad ter know as Josh is booked for quod."

Dan believed him. Nevertheless, when he returned to the block-house and heard Sergeant Silk instructing Trooper Medlicott to remove Casterley's handcuffs, he ventured to interpose.

"Wouldn't it be safer to leave them on him, Sergeant?" he suggested.

As Dan drew back, he was seized from behind.

See page 79.

Silk smiled.

"It's against the regulations," he answered.

Afterwards he strode up to Dan.

"Why did you say that about the handcuffs?" he inquired meaningly.

Dan told him what he had overheard, and what the man George had said.

"All right," nodded the sergeant. "Don't worry."

At sundown it was Dan himself who was put on guard at the block-house. With his loaded carbine, he paced to and fro.

Far away in the forest, a coyote howled dismally. From within the block-house he heard the voices of the prisoners. Foster and Casterley were talking about the gold diggings on the Yukon. Casterley was boasting of the richness of a claim that he had worked.

"Yes," said Nosey. "Dessay you made a pile, same as everyone else. An' that bag of dust as you brought down t' Fort Fraser was a fortune in itself. What I c'n never make out is, why you never went back for more. Guess you was afraid of ghosts, eh?"

"What d'you mean?" snarled Casterley.

"Oh, well," returned Nosey. "You left Dawson City with a pardner. You came to Fort Fraser without one, an' never said nothin' t' nobody 'bout havin' had one. Say, where did you leave that pardner, Josh? Anywhere near a wild, des'late place called Turnagain Pass?"

Dan had renewed his pacing. When he was again by the door, Nosey was speaking.

"Yes, you did," he was saying accusingly. "You left him t' starve, you did. You did a bunk with all the gold, an', wuss'n that, with all the food. An' he died—died of starvation—where we arterwards found his bones. And your own brother, too!"

Suddenly Dan was aware of a movement in the bushes at the farther side of the log hut, where the three prisoners were confined. The prisoners themselves were silent.

Dan stood still, listening.

"Now, pull!" he heard someone whisper, and the whisper was followed by the creaking of timber.

He strode softly, cautiously, to the corner of the hut, and in the dim light saw the crouching figures of three men, who were wrenching the timbers apart with a crowbar. He drew back and was feeling for his whistle to sound an alarm, when he was

seized from behind. His gun was torn from his grasp and a hand was flung across his face.

In the same instant there came the loud report of a pistol shot, quickly followed by a second, and he was released. He staggered forward and fell, but scrambled to his feet again.

The darkness was broken by the bright beam of a bull's-eye lantern, and behind the light he caught the gleam of a scarlet jacket and the scarlet sleeve of an outstretched arm, whose steady hand held a smoking revolver.

Dan turned to look down at the man who had seized him. He lay still on the ground.

"Back! Back!" came the harshly commanding voice of Sergeant Silk.

Four of the men quickly disappeared. One of them leant against the hut with an arm hanging limp.

Silk turned his lantern light upon the man lying at Dan Medlicott's feet.

"He's dead!" said Dan.

"Yes," nodded Silk. "But, you see, it had to be either him or you."

"Thank you, Sergeant," muttered Dan. "But I'm sorry for George."

"You needn't be," returned the soldier-policeman, putting away his gun. "There wasn't a bigger scoundrel in all Canada. And he'd have done for you, sure."

CHAPTER X

THE MAGIC OF A UNIFORM

"HOLD the light a bit nearer, Dannie. That's right. Guess I can feel it now. Keep still, Barney; I won't hurt you more'n I can help. You see, it's a good deal harder to get a bullet out than to put one in, and this one's in pretty thoroughly."

Sergeant Silk was on his knees beside the wounded man, who lay on a bed of clean hay in the middle of the earthen floor of the bunk-house, into which he had been brought by his mates.

With his shirt-sleeves rolled up above his elbows, the sergeant was probing the ugly wound in his patient's bared right shoulder, while Dan Medlicott held the bull's-eye lantern and a coarse towel, and otherwise acted as his surgical assistant.

"Steady now," the operator muttered. "Ah, it's slipped! These forceps are all right for taking out a splinter, but they're a bit too dainty for exploring the recesses of a muscular shoulder like yours, Barney. But, then, you see, a chap can't carry a whole doctor's shop about with him. Ah, I've got it now!" he exclaimed with satisfaction, as he gently drew forth the bullet. "I reckon there's some bone broken in there. Guess it's got to stop where it is for the barrack surgeon to deal with. This that I'm doing is only what they call first-aid to the injured."

He glanced up. Half a dozen of Casterley's cowboys stood around watching him.

"Kin I help you any, Sergeant?" one of them asked rather sheepishly.

"You can fetch me some more warm water," said Silk, "and a strip or two of clean cloth, if you can lay your hands on some. But it must be clean."

"Thar's my Sunday shirt might do," one of the roughest of them suggested. "It's new."

"Reckon thar ain't much as Sergeant Silk can't do," commented another. "He mended Dick Go-Lightly's canoe a treat, an' now he's mendin' Barney O'Brien's arm."

"Got the touch of a woman, he has, with them skilful fingers of his," murmured another, not meaning the officer to hear.

"An' the arm of a blacksmith," added the man next him.

"Say, Sergeant," yet another remarked, "it's some kind of you ter fix up Barney's shoulder that way, seein' as he figgered to put a bullet inter your own body. Yes, an' would ha' done it, too, if you hadn't been so almighty slick with your fancy shooter. Guess you knew he'd covered you."

Silk was delicately drawing the shattered flesh into position.

"Why, cert'nly," he said. "We've got to be some slick dealing with boys that are as handy with the gun as you fellows are. But George needn't have made his wife a widow, and Barney here needn't have been where he is if you'd all used your common sense. You ought to have known we'd be right there. We'd got wind of what you were up to, see? and knew to a minute when to expect you to come fooling around that block-house. Lie still, Barney, while I put a stitch in here. I shall want that lint next, Dan. And when the clean warm water comes, drop one of those antiseptic tabloids into it."

When he had dressed the wound and made Barney as comfortable as the circumstances permitted, he washed his stained hands, put on his jacket and belt, and strolled to the door of the bunk-house, where he took out his pipe.

"You got 'ny tobacco, Sergeant?" one of the men asked, going up to him.

Silk had taken out his pouch, and now he held it forth invitingly.

"D'you want some?" he said.

"No." The rough drew back. "We was figgerin' t' offer some to you, sir."

"Sir, eh?" repeated Silk.

"Yes, *sir*," the man rejoined, with an awkward salute. He glanced back at his mates, who stood in a circle about the stove. It seemed that they had elected him their spokesman. "Say, we've been havin' a kind of mass meetin', Sergeant," he went on, "an' we've come ter the c'nclusion as you've got a heap more grit in you than we thought, though we allus knew you was a man. We've voted plumb straight as you've bin doin' nothin' but your duty, an' we don't owe you no grudge fer wipin' out George, nor for puttin' Barney's shoulder inter limbo. Say, we're willin' ter fix things straight 'bout these yer hosses. We're goin' ter help you all we can, see? An' when we've done——"

He paused, and again looked round at his mates for their approval.

"And when you've done ?" prompted Sergeant Silk, striking a match and holding it to his pipe.

"When we've done," concluded the spokesman, "we're goin', quiet as lambs, ter take our dose of prison."

"That's all right, my boy. That's sensible, sure."

Silk folded his arms and leant his back against the doorpost to look out across the valley to the jagged peaks of the mountains, above which the moon was rising.

The cowboys were as good as their promise. They waited on him, they did his bidding, they even softened the coarseness of their language in his presence ; and on the following morning they were early at work separating the stock into bunches according to their original brand marks, in preparation for restoring them to their rightful owners.

"Say, I don't wonder any at your havin' the name you have, Sergeant," said Dan Medlicott, as he walked by the constable's side towards the block-house, whither they were going to give the three prisoners their breakfast. "The way you've managed to get these desperadoes into hand is about the cleverest thing I've seen. Yesterday there wasn't one of them that wasn't ready to take your life. To-day there isn't one of them who wouldn't risk his own life to do you a good turn. And they all know that they're goin' to prison, too !"

"Don't you make any error, Dan," returned the sergeant. "It isn't me at all. I've done nothing. The whole secret is in this uniform of the Mounted Police. There's something kind of magical about it. Always was, and always will be."

At about ten o'clock that morning, Rippling Water, who was on watch on one of the hills above Dead Lodge Valley, gave his signal that the horsemen from Rattlesnake Ranch were in sight, and shortly afterwards Medicine Pipe-Stem rode in, followed by Corporal Merryweather, Dave Morrison, and six others, including Rip's Indian father, The Moose That Walks. They were all fully armed in expectation of difficulties. But there were no difficulties to meet. With his forces augmented, and his prisoners subdued, Sergeant Silk found it easy to do all that was required.

Josh Casterley claimed that several of the horses in the corrals belonged legally to himself, and there were many "mavericks," or young unbranded animals, whose ownership could not be determined. But all that were identified by marks not wholly

obliterated by Casterley's branding-irons, were cut out into separate bunches to be restored to their several ranches. Of these, by far the larger number belonged to Mrs. Medlicott, and they represented a market value which would more than pay her immediate debts, as well as the two hundred pounds due to Monson & Monson, the Ottawa moneylenders.

As for the prisoners, when they had done all that was asked of them, they were taken in a body to the Police depot at Canmore, to be formally charged with their crime and ultimately sent to Calgary to take their trial.

CHAPTER XI

PERCY RAPSON'S CODE OF HONOUR

In the absence of Sergeant Silk from the neighbourhood of Rattlesnake Ranch and Hilton's Jump, Percy Rapson considered himself safe to break his parole as much as he pleased, and it pleased him to break it every day in defiance of Sergeant Silk. He was beginning to hate Sergeant Silk, as so many persons of weak resolution and uncertain morals hate those who are strong and upright and courageous. He knew that in Silk's eyes he was a waster and a weakling ; he knew that Silk could see him as he really was, and know him through and through, and therefore he took a childish pride in disobedience, even while he was conscious that his rebellion was contemptible. And because Silk despised him for his ill-chosen companionship with the gamblers and desperadoes of Hilton's Jump, he sought them the more.

One thing which greatly incensed him against the man who had arrested him was the fact that Sergeant Silk had proudly rejected his offer of a bribe, refusing a gift of two hundred pounds rather than fail in his duty. Such pride, such dignity, such slavish obedience to duty and honour was altogether beyond the comprehension of the Honourable Percy Rapson.

It is true that Percy observed a certain limited code of honour. At the public school where he had been brought up, he had learnt that it was caddish to sneak against a schoolfellow, to cheat in games, or break any of the rules of schoolboy chivalry.

He had always been loyal to his chums. But of chivalry and honour towards those in high authority he did not know the meaning. It had been a part of his daily routine to deceive his tutor, and he had taken fiendish delight in hoodwinking his housemaster.

And just in the same way he was now taking delight in hoodwinking Sergeant Silk. Just as he used to think it jolly fun to break his word to his schoolmaster, so did he enjoy breaking his parole to this officious and meddlesome policeman.

"The boss hasn't come back yet, I see," he remarked in his superior air to Billy, the cockney bar-tender in Casterley's store. "It's rather rotten coming here and finding no one to have a quiet hand of poker with excepting the scum that are here now. When's he coming back, do you know? And where's Nosey Foster? Gone with him?"

The bar-tender was busy cleaning glasses. He breathed audibly into a tumbler and began vigorously to rub it with his napkin.

"Seems you 'aven't 'eard the news, sir," he said in surprise. "The boss an' the whole bang shoot of the boys have been nabbed."

"Nabbed? How d'you mean?"

"Just nabbed," returned Billy. "Haled off to chokey. Put inter prison."

"My hat!" exclaimed Percy. "Is that so? But how on earth—— Why, Josh told me himself that it was a dead certainty he'd bring off this race. What's he been doing, welshing?"

"Race?" repeated Billy. "Oh, he told you he was off to Regina Spring Meetin', I suppose? No, he ain't been anywhere near Regina. He'd another lay on altogether. Bit of private business away back in Dead Lodge Valley, if you know where that is. Some chap got foolin' around on his trail and informed against him. And Sergeant Silk nabbed the lot of 'em."

"Sergeant Silk again!" muttered Percy, with a resentful scowl. "Say, I wonder some of you chaps don't drop on him some dark night and put him out of the way."

He made the suggestion in all innocence. To give him credit, he would always have drawn the line at violence. A little playful ragging was fun; but it wasn't gentlemanly to do a man an actual physical injury. Billy, however, took the remark seriously.

"Jest what we mean ter do," he said, leaning on the bar counter with the tumbler in one hand and the napkin in the other. "We've come t' the conclusion as it's 'bout time he was rubbed out, see?" He stood back, stuffing the napkin into the glass. "Say, it's all very well for a policeman t' do 'is duty an' take a chap into custody when it can't be helped. But shootin' a man dead, an' half killin' another, ain't just what a policeman's meant for."

Percy Rapson regarded the bar-tender in amazement.

"Do you mean to tell me that Silk has actually shot dead!—dead!—one of the boys?" he cried.

Billy breathed again into the glass.

"Put a bullet inter his chest at sight, an' without any provocation," he answered. "You know George Barrable? That's the boy that's given in his checks. Barney O'Brien's the one that's crippled for life. Nice festive way of arrestin' innocent men, I say. Guess Mister Silk's plumb sure of a promotion fer that biz. Guess he'll be promoted to a higher branch than he thinks. Guess he'll just be lynched. Savee? An' if you're hankerin' any to witness the performance, you may. It's all fixed."

Percy Rapson was beginning to understand that beneath this vague "guessing" there was actually a serious and tragic intention. It was not for nothing that the frequenters of Casterley's store were called desperadoes.

"Fixed?" he repeated, nervously fingering a cigarette and tapping one end of it on the flat of the silver case from which he had taken it. "Fixed? Do you mean that the boys intend to lie in wait for him and—and murder him?"

Billy looked at him in surprise.

"Say, we never make use of a word like that, here," he said. "Murder ain't down in the programme. He's just goin' ter be wiped out, that's all. You see, it ain't murder when more'n one gun is engaged in the job, or when more than one takes part in the promotion business. Say, thar's a heap of diff'rence 'tween murder an' justice. We're only figgerin' ter do a act of justice."

Billy informed Percy that the news of the capture of Josh Casterley and his gang had been brought to Hilton's Jump by the Indian, Medicine Pipe-Stem, and when, after a slow round or two of poker, he left the saloon, Percy betook himself to the wigwam of Medicine Pipe-Stem in the hope of learning more.

His interview with the reticent Indian was difficult. It was like digging hard granite to try to get any information out of him. Either Medicine Pipe-Stem did not understand the unfamiliar language of the pale-face boy, or he answered questions with a slow shake of his head, and merely grunted and indicated that his questioner had better ask someone else. He declined even to explain how it happened that he alone of Casterley's gang was at liberty, while the rest had all been taken into custody. So Percy gave him two or three cigarettes, and took his departure.

When he arrived back at Rattlesnake Ranch, the family were

at tea. Dan Medlicott had just come in from the fields, where he had been helping with the seeding, and he was in his roughest working clothes. Joan had been baking; there was a plateful of her doughnuts on the table; and Betty, as usual, had been gardening. Bob Medlicott was off on police duty again.

Mrs. Medlicott was in a particularly cheerful mood. She had been relieved of her money worries by the return of the horses, and when Percy entered she was discussing the possibilities of buying a reaping machine for harvesting the wheat, which was not yet wholly sown.

"Dear me, Percy," she said, as that young man threw his cap on the sofa and took his customary seat by her side. "What a pity it is that we have no fox-hunting here. It must be rather slow for you riding about the prairie without any settled object. Where have you been to-day?"

"Where've I been?" he said. "Oh, just along the creek and then back through the forest. And I met an Indian along there." This was vague; but he meant to be vague. "Called himself Medicine Clay-Pipe, or some such name. Rather a stupid cove on the whole. I'm beginning to think that all Indians are stupid, and that their reputed extraordinary intelligence is all rot, vamped up by writers of fiction. I've yet to meet the Indian who can come within miles of deserving to be called a Noble Savage."

Dan looked across at him.

"What had Medicine Pipe-Stem to say for himself?" he inquired very quietly.

"Nothing much," Percy responded. "He tried to tell me some long-winded story about some johnnies from over there at Hilton's Jump, who had fallen foul of the Mounted Police somewhere up in the mountains. I don't know what their crime was, exactly, but there was some shooting, it seems, and those who were not knocked over or winged were taken off to prison."

He glanced at Mrs. Medlicott.

"By the way, your friend Sergeant Silk appears to be responsible for killing at least one of them," he added.

"I'm pretty certain it was in self-defence and in the proper performance of his duty," observed Mrs. Medlicott with dignity. "Those people at Hilton's Jump would all be cleared out if I had my way. And, you see, horse-stealing and cattle-rustling are serious crimes in Canada."

She looked aside at Dan.

"Didn't you tell Percy about the shooting of George Barrable?" she inquired.

"I've told him nothin', mother," Dan answered. "I guess Percy's by way of knowin' a good deal more of what goes on at Hilton's Jump and elsewhere than I am."

Percy winced slightly.

"Dan doesn't know whether the shooting was in self-defence or not," he muttered awkwardly.

"Oh, yes, I do," said Dan. "You see, I was there. I know all about it."

Percy's ignorance of what had happened in Dead Lodge Valley was due largely to the fact that he was seldom present at the family meals when the news of the neighbourhood was discussed. He was about to question Dan, when there was a knock at the door, and one of the ranch hands entered. It was a man named Tom Woodruff, a particular friend of Betty's, because of his knowledge of flowers and his skill in gardening.

"Well, Tom?" said Mrs. Medlicott.

"If you please, ma'am," said Tom, "I've fetched back the bottle of physic. It have done my toothache a power o' good. An' seein' as it's p'ison, I guessed I'd best not let it lay about."

"All right, Tom. Put it on the shelf, over there," Mrs. Medlicott instructed him. "I'm glad it did you good."

After tea, Percy Rapson stood near the shelf lighting a cigarette, and his eye alighted on the bottle. He saw that it was labelled "Laudanum," and that it was still half full.

He went out by way of the scullery into the back yard, where he kept an interesting litter of bull pups.

"I say, Maple Leaf, you're giving these pups too much to eat, you know," he said to the Indian girl, who was washing out saucepans at the side of the stream. "They're getting so beastly fat they'll bust if you don't mind."

Maple Leaf glided silently to his side. He looked into her eyes. They were very beautiful eyes, with long dark lashes. She was fairer than her brother, Rippling Water, and her cheek-bones were not so pronounced as his, neither was her nose so arched. Her lips were like those of a Greek goddess, Percy had once told her, and when she opened them, which was seldom, she revealed her wonderfully white and even teeth.

"You're getting prettier every day, Maple Leaf," Percy said now. And her cheeks became more ruddy under their natural tan at the compliment.

"You've been again to Hilton's Jump," she said reprovingly.

"Yes," he admitted. "I went to fetch some chocolates for you." He felt in his pocket and brought out a small parcel. "Here they are," he said, and, as she took the parcel, he caught her fingers in his own and held them for a long time, gazing into her eyes yearningly. She drew herself away.

Calling one of his dogs, Percy strolled in among the forest trees at the rear of the house. He had no particular destination; but he had long ago discovered that he was not greatly appreciated by the Medlicott family, and their honest simplicity was objectionable to him.

He considered Mrs. Medlicott a fearfully straight-laced person. She was miles too strict for his comfort. She objected to his leaving his cigarette-ends about the house; she almost objected to his smoking at all. She was for ever urging him to do farm work, as if he were a paid labourer. As for playing cards, she wouldn't allow a card to be seen in her house.

And all her family were like her. Even Bob, who was a constable in the Mounted Police, didn't smoke, and was a teetotaller. Percy Rapson hated teetotallers, and he thought it contemptibly squeamish for a fellow not to smoke. Dan was no better. He took life too seriously, and was beastly priggish.

No, he had no special destination. He only wanted to be alone. So he strolled off with his dog into the forest and didn't return until it was nearly dusk.

Maple Leaf met him as he approached the house. He had wanted to meet her again before entering.

"I heard a horse coming along the trail just now," he said to her. "Has anyone come? Is there a visitor indoors?"

The girl nodded mysteriously.

"Yes," she answered. "Sergeant Silk."

"Good glory!" exclaimed Percy in alarm.

"Guess he's here to arrest you," said Maple Leaf. She knew all about his breaking his parole, as well as the charge against him. "What you goin' t' do?" she asked.

He drew her to the back of the timber-stack.

"I'm not going to face him," he answered. "I can't. I'm going to do a bunk."

"He will follow you. He will find you, wherever you hide," the girl warned him. "He will go first to Hilton's Jump. You cannot get the better of Sergeant Silk."

"Look here, Maple Leaf," he whispered, "you'd do a lot for me, I know; wouldn't you?"

"Heaps," she assured him. She was genuinely fond of him.

"Well," said he, "you've got to prevent him following me. How? Oh, easily. I'll tell you how. He's sure to want some coffee presently. You'll make it?"

"Yes? But I always make it. I will make it to-night."

"Listen," he said in a voice that trembled. "You'll find a little bottle on the shelf, back of the pantry door—the bottle that Tom had for the toothache. There's no harm in it."

She drew back.

"It's marked 'poison.' I saw it," she said.

He caught at her hands.

"Yes. I dare say if you drank the whole bottleful it would upset you. But a few drops won't do any harm. They'll only send him to sleep. That's all I want. You can easily drop them into the coffee-pot. No, that won't do. You'll pour out a cup of coffee and take it in for him. But before you take it in, you'll put the stuff into the cup. Thirty drops, d'you hear? thirty—no more, no less. You understand, Maple Leaf? It's for me you're doing this—for *me*."

"Oh, but no," she hesitated. "How can I do such a thing? It is not right. It's wicked. And—Sergeant Silk, who is so brave and good and noble! You ask me to do harm to him?"

"Nonsense!" urged Percy. "Isn't he going to take me to prison? Do you want to know that I'm far away in a prison cell? You'll do that much for me, I'm sure. Thirty drops, remember!"

Percy Rapson did not enter the house. Instead, he went round to the stables, saddled his horse and led it quietly away. He did not mount until he was at the farther side of the bridge. And then, leaping into the saddle, he made straight for Hilton's Jump.

CHAPTER XII

THE CRY IN THE NIGHT

Sergeant Silk had been a considerable time in the house before he made inquiries after Percy Rapson. He had discussed with Mrs. Medlicott the question of the future working of the ranch, and the qualities and prices of various reapers and binders, and he had given his expert advice to Joan concerning the arrangements of ribbons and feathers in the new spring hat that she was making. At length he turned to Dan and said to him very casually :

" Where is Percy Rapson ? I have not seen him yet."

Dan glanced at the sofa for Percy's cap, where it was usually to be found when he was in the house.

" Really, I don't know," he answered. " He was here at tea, of course. I expect he's gone out for a stroll. Do you want him ? "

" I'm afraid I do," returned Silk with a meaning look into Dan's face. " Indeed, it is for him that I've come here. He is to go away with me. You understand, don't you ? "

" To-night ? " exclaimed Dan. " You're not going away from here to-night ! "

" I must," answered Silk. " Not because of Rapson. My business with him would do as well in the morning, and I should be glad to stay the night. But I have a dispatch to deliver to Inspector M'Ginnis at the barracks at Canmore, and it's important, very important. Yes, I must go to-night."

" But, sure," interposed Mrs. Medlicott, hearing his last words, " whatever it is, it can't be so important that it must be delivered in the middle of the night ! Inspector M'Ginnis will hardly thank you for disturbing his rest."

Sergeant Silk smiled.

" Its importance has nothing to do with me, Mrs. Medlicott," he said. " I don't even know what it is. It might be an order for so many loads of forage ; it might be the reprieve of a man's

life. It is not my concern. I'm told to deliver it, and if the devil himself stands in the way, I've got to do my duty."

"You always were a stickler for duty, Sergeant," smiled Mrs. Medlicott. "In the circumstances I will not press you to stay over night. But you will have supper, of course. We've some nice cold venison, and prairie fowl, and stewed dried apples, to say nothing of the fresh bread of Joan's baking, which you declared once was the best you ever got on all your patrol."

"Joan's bread is excellent always," acknowledged the sergeant, "and your venison is tempting; but if it's all the same to you, I will be content with a cup of coffee. In the meantime, I'll just slip out and have a look at my horse and give him a feed."

Mrs. Medlicott knew that Sergeant Silk allowed no one to feed his horse but himself, and she admiringly watched him as he stood up and strode to the door. Dan accompanied him.

"Do you suppose he's gone along to Hilton's Jump, Dan?" the sergeant inquired, when they were alone. "I know he has broken his parole more than once. He will not have another chance. To-night he goes off with me as my prisoner. I'm sorry; but the warrant is issued, and he must take his trial. The law is no respecter of persons."

"He was there this afternoon," Dan reluctantly confessed. "He saw Medicine Pipe-Stem there. I don't know what he could want going again. He was certainly about the ranch within the last hour."

"Perhaps he was," nodded Silk. "Nevertheless, I heard a horse being taken from the stable just after I'd arrived. If he knew I was here, he's capable of trying to escape."

In the stable they found that Percy's horse was missing.

"Fortunately, Hilton's Jump is on my way to Canmore," said the sergeant. "I guess I shall drop on him, somehow."

When he returned into the house, he was greeted by the appetising aroma of hot coffee. Maple Leaf carried a steaming cup to the table and placed it beside the plate of venison, which Joan had prepared for him. He glanced at the clock and then compared it with his watch.

"Do you always keep your clock half an hour fast, Mrs. Medlicott?" he inquired. "I find I have more time than I thought."

Joan went up to the clock and put back the offending finger.

"We generally depend upon you for giving us the correct time," she smiled. "It has gained that half-hour since you were here last."

He ate heartily and sipped his coffee slowly, talking meanwhile to Joan and her mother, and giving an occasional word to Betty and Dan. Maple Leaf watched him from the scullery. She had put back the bottle on the shelf. She had remembered—thirty drops, no more, no less; and she had counted truly. Her hand had been very steady.

Sergeant Silk finished his coffee and continued talking. His speech became slow. Again he looked up at the clock. His eyes drooped heavily.

"I must go now," he said sleepily, "though I'm so drowsy after all that supper—so drowsy—duty—else disgrace—so sleepy. Must go now."

"Can't you stay, Sergeant?" Joan asked.

He did not answer her. His head rested on the back of his chair. His eyes were closed. After a while Dan Medlicott tried to waken him.

"Don't, Dan," said Mrs. Medlicott. "The sleep will do him good."

"But he said he must go to Canmore to-night," Dan protested, unbuttoning the sergeant's tunic with busy fingers and thrusting his hand into the inner pocket.

"What are you doing?" Joan demanded.

"I want that letter," said Dan. "It must be delivered. Here it is! He can't take it. I will!"

He picked up the sergeant's hat and put it on his own head; his cloak, and threw it over his back. He went out to the stables, saddled his own horse, Gipsy, leapt astride, and rode off down the track through the pine trees. With a noisy clatter of hoofs, he crossed the bridge. He raced through the orchard road and over the arable land to the buffalo trail.

The night was very dark, but he knew every foot of the way, and the moon was rising. It would be above the hills before he reached the low-lying marshy ground, where travelling was difficult.

He told himself that he would pass to the northward of Hilton's Jump. He could not concern himself with Percy Rapson. The one important thing was the sealed letter, which was safe in his breast-pocket. He would take it to the barracks and deliver it to Inspector M'Ginnis, and then ride home again, and by doing so he would at least save Sergeant Silk from possible disgrace.

Once, as he rode along the buffalo trail, he thought he saw a light far in front of him, flickering like a will-o'-the-wisp. Once

Something whistled through the air above him, and the loop of a lariat dropped over his head and shoulders.

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he fancied that he could hear the padding of horses' hoofs on the marshy ground.

On and on he galloped. The moon had risen now; but its light brought out strange shadows that were confusing.

Suddenly a weird, unearthly sound startled him. At first he thought it was the howling of some wolf, and yet there was something almost human in its tone.

He drew rein, and Gipsy's gallop dropped to an easy canter.

The sound came to him again, this time clear and unmistakable. It was the shriek of a woman, and it thrilled him with terror. It came from the direction of the marsh, cutting the night air.

He listened anxiously for its repetition, and it came very soon—a cry of distress, of pain, an appeal for help.

What was he to do? How could he render help?

He knew what Sergeant Silk would do. Silk could not resist that terrible, insistent cry of appeal. He would go at once, even into the most dangerous parts of the morass, and nothing would stop him from giving the required aid.

Dan had trained himself in the difficult art of locating sound, and, fixing his gaze in the direction from which the appeal had come, he urged his horse towards it, leaving the beaten trail and taking to the uneven ground. He was not afraid; but in spite of himself his limbs trembled, his heart thumped against his ribs, and a cold perspiration broke out upon his face.

Among the shadows of the bushes in advance of him he could see strange, fantastic shapes. Here and there was the dull gleam of a patch of stagnant water, and across one of them there moved a flash of light that was not from the moon.

The woman's scream had subsided for a time; but again it came to him, always from the same place, always with the same thrilling appeal, for help in distress. He did not know why, but he had taken out his revolver. His grip upon it seemed to inspire him with confidence; he did not expect that there could be any occasion for him to make use of the weapon.

His horse started suddenly. Right in front of him he could see the shadowy form of a man passing with swift steps between two bushes.

Something whistled through the air above him. It was like the whirr of a bird's wings; but before he could ask himself what it was, the loop of a lariat dropped over his head and shoulders.

Instantly he was flung from his saddle. There was a pistol-shot, but whether it was his own revolver that had been discharged or not he could not have told. All that he knew was that half a

dozen men with masked faces had leapt out upon him with knives that flashed in the moonlight, and that a voice, which seemed to be somehow familiar to him, was crying aloud:

"Stop! Stop! I tell you! It's not him! It's not Silk at all! You've got the wrong man!"

CHAPTER XIII

SERGEANT SILK MAKES DEDUCTIONS

It was seven o'clock in the morning when Sergeant Silk's eyes opened slowly and looked dazedly before him. He seemed to be conscious of nothing, to take no interest in his surroundings. Presently his wandering gaze rested on Dan Medlicott sitting opposite to him at the farther side of the table. At first there was no recognition in his expression ; but soon a look of understanding came into his eyes.

" Dan ? " he said sleepily. " You here, in barracks ? "

Dan was startled by the voice breaking the silence so suddenly. He had fallen into a doze while waiting for the sergeant to awake out of the heavy sleep which had lasted so long.

" We're not in barracks," he responded. " We're at Rattlesnake Ranch."

The soldier-policeman put his hand to his head, then rubbed his eyes roughly, and looked up again, beyond Dan, and into the scullery, where the Indian girl, Maple Leaf, stood in the morning sunlight, furtively watching him while she made a pretence of preparing food for the hens.

She had been watching him all through the night while Dan had been absent. She had seen Mrs. Medlicott and Joan trying to rouse him. When their efforts failed, they had taken off his spurs and boots, opened his tunic at the throat, put a pillow behind his head, and, thus making him comfortable, had left Maple Leaf in charge, to wait until Dan should return after his long night ride to the barracks at Canmore.

A great fear had come upon the girl lest he should never awake —lest Percy Rapson had made a mistake when he had told her that the drops from the bottle would do him no harm. She wondered if she had counted them aright. Perhaps, in spite of her steady hand and her careful counting, she had given one drop too many, and the black stuff was poison—poison !

Twice or thrice during the long and silent hours of watching

she had crept up to him and tried to awaken him. His sleep was alarmingly heavy. He never moved; she could scarcely hear his breathing.

When she lifted his hand it was just a dead weight. When she dared to put her hands to his head and turn it against the pillow, it seemed to be lifeless. Even when, at daybreak, Dan Medlicott came in and spoke to him, and touched him more roughly than she had done, there was no response. And Dan, too, had been alarmed.

But now he had opened his eyes. He was not dead. Percy had been right, after all, and the drops had only sent him to sleep.

Maple Leaf drew a deep sigh of relief. But her relief was only momentary. She felt sure that Sergeant Silk would find out about the bottle, and she began to fear him more awake than asleep.

"Rattlesnake Ranch?" he repeated confusedly. Then he added, starting forward: "What is the matter? Have I been asleep? What!"

He staggered to his feet. Remembrance had come back to him. His hand went quickly inside his tunic, searching in the pocket.

"The letter!" he cried with more excitement than Dan had ever before known him betray. "It's gone! Gone! Someone has robbed me! Do you hear, Dan Medlicott? I've been robbed!"

He glanced again towards the scullery. Maple Leaf nervously clutched at the heavy bowl of chicken food, and, turning away, glided out by the back door.

"I remember now," said Silk, his chest heaving in agitation. "I couldn't keep awake after drinking that coffee. I tried to fight against it, and I failed—failed in my duty; went to sleep at my post. I've been lying here asleep like a hog when I ought to have been taking that letter to Inspector M'Ginnis! Coffee never served me like that before—never!" He gave a quick look round at Dan. "Was it drugged, I wonder?" he panted.

"Drugged?" repeated Dan in astonishment at such an extraordinary suggestion. "That's impossible. You were dog tired, that's all. Your sleep was quite natural."

Sergeant Silk again felt in his pocket, as though he thought that the missing letter might still be there. But his hand was empty when he drew it out.

"No one could have robbed me if I'd been in a natural sleep," he declared sternly. "Who did it? Who drugged me in order that they might steal that letter?" There was something of accusation in his eyes as he fixed them upon Dan. "Was it you?" he demanded. "Are you—*you*—at the bottom of this, Dan Medlicott? Where is that letter? You knew I had it. Where is it?"

Dan had stood up, with his hand on the back of his chair. He was abashed. His face was flushed almost guiltily.

"Yes, Sergeant," he answered. "I knew about the letter. I knew how anxious you were to deliver it last night. I am the thief. When we couldn't wake you, I took the letter from your pocket, and—and delivered it to Inspector M'Ginnis."

"What?" cried Silk in amazement. "I don't understand. You say that you carried that letter to the barracks at Canmore, and gave it to Inspector M'Ginnis?"

"Yes," Dan answered meekly. "I rode there and back on Gipsy. I wore your hat and cloak, thinkin' to pass myself off as one of the Mounted Police. It wasn't much good my doing that. It was a silly mistake. My brother Bob was on sentry-go, and he knew me at once, and saw that there was something queer. And Inspector M'Ginnis, who'd been expectin' the letter—waitin' up for it—wanted to know where you were, and why you hadn't brought it yourself instead of sendin' it along by an irresponsible kid. Say, he got into a rare rage, an' swore fit to knock down the barrack gate, he did."

Sergeant Silk tugged at his moustache, ran his fingers through his hair, and tapped the floor with his foot. He was clearly as much upset by his neglect of duty as his superior officer had been, only that he controlled himself with greater dignity.

"What did you say?" he inquired. "You told him exactly the truth, I hope—that I considered a comfortable sleep in your mother's easy chair much more important than my duty?"

"I didn't put it that way," smiled Dan. "I simply said that you seemed to get suddenly weak, that you'd become unconscious, that we couldn't rouse you, and that as you'd mentioned a letter that you had to deliver, I'd just brought it along for you, thinkin' it might be important. And it certainly was important, Sergeant."

"Was it? But even if it was of no importance whatever, I ought to have taken it myself. I neglected my duty, see? And your taking it doesn't make a cent's difference. I shall be reprimanded—disgraced!"

"It makes a lot of difference," returned Dan. "A man's life depended on it. Inspector M'Ginnis told me so. It was a reprieve for a man condemned to death. He was to have been executed at six o'clock this morning. The letter has set him free."

Sergeant Silk drew a deep breath.

"A reprieve—for Denis O'Connor? Then he is innocent! Ah, I knew it! Thank God you were in time! His wife and family will bless you, Dan, for what you've done. What an escape!"

He strode quickly across the room, and, picking up his boots and spurs, hurriedly put them on. Then he took up his cloak and hat, where Dan had dropped them across the end of the table.

"Where are you going?" Dan asked. "To Canmore?"

"Why, cert'nly," Silk nodded. "I must go and report myself."

He was putting his Stetson hat into shape, when something about it caused him to look at it more closely.

"Hullo!" he exclaimed in perplexity. "What's this? A bullet-hole through my hat! What does it mean? Someone been having a lark? Or——"

He went up to Dan, and, seizing him by the shoulder, looked down upon the crown of his head. With his free hand he gently parted the rough hair. It was matted with blood, and the scalp beneath it was cut as with a knife.

"Guess you've had rather a close shave there, Dannie, my boy," he said very softly. "D'you mind telling me who was the barber?"

Dan drew back from him.

"I didn't mean to tell you anythin' about it, Sergeant," he said awkwardly. "But I suppose I've got to, now that you've found out about the bullet. It happened down there beside the marsh, when I was poundin' along on my way to Canmore. A gang of fellows from Hilton's Jump waylaid me. They got one of their squaw women to yell and scream and call for help, as if she was bein' hurt, and I went aside from the trail, thinkin' to rescue her, as you would have done. It was only a trap they'd laid for me, though, and I fell into it. They pulled me from my saddle with a lasso; they fired at me. There was about a dozen of them, all masked. They rushed at me from among the bushes, with knives and bludgeons, and I just guess I should have been done for right away if they hadn't been stopped in time."

"Stopped?" said Silk. "How? By your six-shooter? Of course, you used it?"

"No." Dan shook his head. "I didn't use it. They were stopped by someone who shouted out to them: 'Stop! Stop, I tell you. It's not him. It's not Silk! You've got the wrong man!'"

Sergeant Silk gave a long, low whistle of consternation.

"So?" said he. "Then it seems that it was for me that they'd laid their trap. What did they do when they discovered their mistake?"

"They flung my cloak over my face and disappeared," Dan explained. "I found Gipsy with the Indian woman holdin' her ready for me to mount. I mounted, and rode off with the letter."

"H'm!" muttered Sergeant Silk, striding slowly to and fro across the room with his hands behind his back. "Should you know any of them again?"

Dan shook his head.

"No, I don't think so," he answered.

Sergeant Silk came to a halt at the back of the pantry door, and, standing there with an elbow resting on the shelf, he pursued:

"I should think you would recognise the voice of the one who—who saved your life by calling to them to stop. Wasn't it a clear, boyish, English voice?" he asked pointedly.

Dan hesitated to answer. He was wondering how Sergeant Silk had guessed what kind of a voice it was that he had heard. Silk, however, did not appear to expect any answer, for he had turned with his face to the shelf and was curiously examining the small dark bottle which Tom Woodruff had put there at tea-time on the previous evening.

Silk did not touch it at first. His attention seemed to be fixed upon a streak of dark moisture left by a drop of the liquid which had trickled down from the cork across the label to the wood of the shelf.

"That bottle of laudanum oughtn't to have been left there," said Dan. "Tom Woodruff had it for his toothache."

"When?" Silk's voice was sharply imperative.

"Yesterday afternoon. It did him a lot of good, he said."

"I dare say," nodded Silk. "It's powerful stuff. I see somebody has been at it since Tom brought it back. Who was it, I wonder?"

He glanced aside into the scullery. Dan went up to him and caught excitedly at his arm.

"Sergeant!" he cried, "Do you mean that someone—someone belonging to this family—put some of that laudanum into your coffee—to send you to sleep? Is that what you mean?"

"I did not say so." Silk shrugged his shoulders and presently added: "Where is Percy Rapson? Do you know?"

"Percy? Oh, but it couldn't have been him," Dan protested. "Percy wasn't in the house when your coffee was made."

"Exactly! He had already gone off to Hilton's Jump, having instructed Maple Leaf just how to manipulate the poison and the coffee. A very clever trick. Percy appears to be an expert in getting other people to do his dirty work for him. I am obliged to him, however, for having stopped those ruffians from killing you, as they meant to kill me. He saved your life, Dan, and, in doing so, he also saved the life of poor Denis O'Connor."

Dan regarded Sergeant Silk in silence for some moments.

"It's clever of you to have found out all this," he said. "But do you believe that it was he who put those men up to layin' a trap for you? He couldn't have known that you'd be ridin' that way. He couldn't have known that you were going with that letter to Canmore."

"Sure!" agreed Silk. "But he could have guessed that I should follow on his track, wherever he went. Ah——"

He broke off abruptly and went very quietly into the scullery, where he stood by the window looking out. Dan followed and stood behind him.

"You see, I was right about Maple Leaf," said Sergeant Silk. "Look!"

It was Maple Leaf herself that he was watching. The girl was at the timber stack, kneeling against it, while from a jug she was pouring milk into a cup. She put down the jug, and, moving aside a light branch of timber, passed the cup of milk into a cavity beyond. Then she waited, and presently the empty cup was returned to her by a hidden hand.

Sergeant Silk smiled grimly as he put on his hat.

"Come, Dan," he beckoned, and Dan followed him towards the timber stack.

Maple Leaf leapt to her feet as they approached: but she did not betray any alarm. She calmly replaced the branch that she had moved.

"Feeding Percy Rapson's bull-pups, I suppose," said Sergeant Silk, casually twirling his moustache. "How are they getting on? May I see them?"

"Just as I expected," said Sergeant Silk, seizing Percy Rapson by the wrist.

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Maple Leaf dropped the empty cup to the ground, where it broke into fragments.

"No!" she cried agitatedly. "Don't touch them. They are asleep!"

"Eh? You been giving them laudanum in that milk?" As he spoke, Sergeant Silk laid hold of the branch and drew it aside. "Just as I expected," he said, seizing Percy Rapson by the wrist and dragging him out from his hiding-place.

Percy was trembling like a leaf. His face was woefully haggard, and his eyes were sunken and dark. He staggered to his feet.

"I'm ill, Sergeant," he stammered.

"Ill, are you?" The officer looked at him keenly. "Yes, I see you are. But you've chosen a queer place for a hospital. You had better come with me. We will look after you in the prison infirmary. Why, your pulse is galloping like a stampeding pony! You've got a red-hot temperature, too. This is what comes of your breaking your parole and going so often to Hilton's Jump, my lad. It's scarlet fever you've caught. It's ragin' in Hilton's Jump. Here, put my cloak over you. You mustn't go into the house to spread the infection."

He turned to Dan Medlicott, requesting him to saddle his broncho, and get a man to make ready a buckboard.

Dan hastened to obey; and within half an hour Percy Rapson was lying under blankets in the cart, driven by Chick Nutter, and the police-sergeant and his sick prisoner were on their way to Canmore Barracks.

CHAPTER XIV

THE WOODLAND WIGWAM

"I've changed my mind about Indians during the past three months," declared the Honourable Percy. "I find that the idle lot that fooled around at Hilton's Jump, gambling and quarrelling, and hanging about on the off-chance of getting a free drink of firewater, were not to be taken as genuine samples of their race; at least, none of them, excepting Medicine Pipe-Stem. He was the only one of the gang who was any good."

He was lying indolently back in the cushioned prow of a slowly-drifting canoe, with his straw hat drawn down to a level with his nose to shield his eyes from the glare of the setting sun, his hands clasped at the back of his head, and one leg propped high across the knee of the other, showing a dainty, bright-coloured sock above his canvas shoes.

Dan Medlicott dipped the blade of his paddle to bring the canoe round to the current.

"Seems to me you've changed your mind about a heap of things since you've been sick and in prison," he said. "You're changed in lots of ways."

"Am I?" Percy withdrew a hand from under his head to take a cigarette from the open tin box at his elbow. Then he put the cigarette back again and, closing the box, pushed it away.

"Yes," Dan smiled, observing the act of rejection. "That's one way in which you're changed. You don't smoke nearly as many cigarettes as you used to—even on the excuse of keepin' off the mosquitoes. Why have you put that one back?"

"I've smoked seven to-day," said Percy, "and I shall smoke only three more before we turn in. That makes the ten."

"And why exactly ten?" Dan inquired. "Why not nine or eleven?"

Percy raised himself by an elbow and sat upright to watch Rippling Water, who was kneeling in the bilge of the canoe extracting a hook from the gills of a very fine trout.

"Well, you see," he answered, "I promised Sergeant Silk that I'd keep to that limit."

Dan Medlicott rested his dripping paddle across the gunwales, and leant his folded bare arms upon it.

"Say, Percy, you weren't always so particular 'bout keepin' your word to Sergeant Silk," he remarked. "Would he ever know if you smoked a hundred cigarettes instead of ten?"

"No, of course he wouldn't," returned Percy. "But all the same, I should be breaking my word to him. I should be deceiving him; and I wouldn't deceive Silk for anything."

"You used to dislike him," pursued Dan. "You used even to hate him."

"Yes, I know I did," Percy admitted with a sigh. "But that was before he took me off as his prisoner. I made the silly mistake of believing that because he was a policeman he was therefore my enemy, and that he interfered with me unnecessarily, whereas all the time he has been simply the greatest friend I've ever had in all my natural. You don't know—you'll never know—what Sergeant Silk has done for me, Dan," he added earnestly.

"Ah!" muttered Antoine from the farther end of the canoe; "but eet ees hees way all de tam. You no can mek enemy of Sergeant Silk. Many mens dey try for do heem harm. It ess not possible. What!"

"I thought it real considerate of him to keep the report of your trial and sentence out of the newspapers," said Dan. "And I suppose he made it light for you, didn't he, when he was givin' evidence against you?"

"Not a bit of it," declared Percy. "He forgot nothing. He even made it jolly hot for me. He told all about my gambling at Hilton's Jump; my dealings with smuggled whisky; about my breaking my parole; and even the drugging of the coffee. The only thing that he pleaded in my favour was that I was already pretty well punished for my crime by having caught scarlet fever, and to ask that my time in the sick ward should be counted in my sentence, which it was. As a matter of fact, I never was put into the cells, so it wasn't like being in prison at all. Indeed, I had a ripping fine time."

He paused, glancing across the lake to the jagged peaks of the mountains.

"You see," he went on presently. "Sergeant Silk got himself put on to sickroom duty, and it was he who nursed me—nursed me just like a woman; told me all sorts of stories of his school-days in England, and of his adventures among the Indians

before he joined the Mounted Police. And bit by bit I got to understand what a straight and upright chap he is. You may be sure I was awfully sorry when he had to go away."

"Away?" repeated Dan. "Has he gone off on another patrol? No wonder we haven't seen anythin' of him at the ranch!"

"And yet he hasn't been so very far away from Rattlesnake," Percy explained. "He has only been at Hilton's Jump, punishing those desperado johnnies who so nearly did for you that night."

"Indeed!" exclaimed Dan. "He might have given us a call. How long has he been there?"

"About a month," Percy answered. "You see, his method of punishing them took a peculiar and original form. He nursed them through an epidemic of diphtheria and scarlet fever. The Indians and half-breeds were dying by scores before he went there; but he worked like a nigger, night and day, as doctor, nurse, lawyer, and sanitary inspector all in one. At last he has conquered the epidemic and left the place as clean, morally and physically, as any model village at home in England. They've got no use for guns now in Hilton's Jump, and they've forgotten the way to play poker. Josh Casterley won't know the place when he goes back from prison."

Rippling Water had put away his fishing tackle and taken up his paddle. Dan and he dipped their blades in the glassy calm water, and the canoe began to glide with quickening movement past the immense forest trees that bordered the shores of the lake.

When they had got into their regular stroke, Antoine touched the strings of his guitar and started one of the old Canadian boat songs:

> Faintly as tolls the evening chime,
> Our voices keep tune and our oars keep time;
> Soon as the woods on the shores grow dim,
> We'll sing at St. Anne's our parting hymn.
> Row, brothers, row! The stream runs fast;
> The rapids are near, and the daylight's past.

It was the first evening of this canoeing trip on Lake Minnewanka. Percy Rapson had, perhaps very naturally, objected to returning to Rattlesnake Ranch immediately upon his release from prison. He felt that it would be embarrassing for himself as well as for Mrs. Medlicott and her daughters; and a few days previous to his discharge he had consulted with Sergeant Silk, who came up to him in the exercise-yard looking rather haggard after his battle with the pestilence at the half-breed's village.

"You see, Sergeant," he said, "I don't quite cotton to going

back there straight from prison, with my disgrace upon me fresh as red paint. I want something to come in between, as a kind of break, so that I can have something else to talk about than my experiences as a gaol-bird, see ? "

" Exactly," Silk agreed. " I quite appreciate your feeling."

" Now, if I could take a trip among the Rocky Mountains and have a spell of big-game shooting," pursued Percy.

Sergeant Silk had shaken his head at this suggestion.

" You're not quite strong enough for that yet," he objected. " What you want is a nice quiet trip on the lakes and creeks in a Canadian canoe, along with two or three chosen companions. It would do you all the good in the world, and fix you up after your illness, to have a week or two camping out, living like a scout or an Indian. I dare say Dan Medlicott would join you, and you ought to take Antoine ; he'd be useful. For a fourth, you might take that young Indian, Rippling Water. He knows a lot about scoutcraft. And talking of scouting, I guess I can give you something to do that'll make your trip useful as well as enjoyable."

" Some fugitive criminal to track down ? " smiled Percy.

" No, he's not a criminal ; he's not a fugitive from justice He's just a lone Indian who has gone right away out of sight and knowledge, and I want to find him, see ? The fact is, he has enemies. They've threatened to go on his track and do him some harm, and I'd like to warn him. Say, I believe you know him. His name is Medicine Pipe-Stem."

" Why, of course I know him," said Percy. " I used to meet him often enough at Hilton's Jump."

Sergeant Silk said : " Exactly ! " and proceeded to give his reasons for believing that Medicine Pipe-Stem had made camp somewhere in the forest glades bordering Lake Minnewanka. He proposed that the boys should make the tour of the lake and explore the creeks, taking a full camp outfit with them, and that, finding the Indian, they should take up their quarters with him in his wigwam and live with him as Indians, fishing in the lake, trapping up the creeks, learning from him the secrets of the woods, and, in the meantime, watching that no harm came to him.

And so here they were with their canoe on Lake Minnewanka, at the end of their first afternoon of search.

Percy proposed that they should make their camp on one of the many wooded islands that dotted the lake ; but as they were paddling towards one of them they came to the opening of a creek overhung with maple trees, and they steered inward.

The creek was so narrow that there was only room upon either side of the canoe for the paddle blades, and the reeds swayed with the swishing sound of a breeze as the prow cut through them. All the banks were a glory of beautiful flowers.

In a clearing which seemed to have been made by Nature for the purposes of a camp, they erected their bell tent, built a fire, cooked their freshly caught trout, and sat round to enjoy their first camp meal.

Antoine was the one who arranged everything. The way in which he contrived to turn that forest glade into a living-room with all the conveniences of a home was astonishing. Sergeant Silk had been right when he said that Antoine was skilled in scoutcraft.

When they had washed up and made ready for the night, they sat round the fire for a big talk. They had a map of Minnewanka Lake, and it was expedient to plan their tour so that they should leave no creek or inlet unexplored in their search for the wigwam of Medicine Pipe-Stem.

"Seems to me it doesn't matter a whole lot whether we find him or not," observed Dan Medlicott. "I just guess Sergeant Silk has set us this scouting task only to give us a reason for exploring the lake."

"Don't you make any mistake," said Percy Rapson, lighting his ninth cigarette. "Sergeant Silk isn't the one to play practical jokes. He knows that Medicine Pipe-Stem's life has been threatened, and we're here to see that that threat isn't carried out. We've got to take that Indian under our wing and watch that no harm happens to him, until Silk can come and take charge of him."

"You didn't tell us that Sergeant Silk was comin' to join us," said Dan.

"I'm not sure that he is," returned Percy. "It's outside of his patrol, anyway; and this isn't a police business. It's just a private matter. You see, Sergeant Silk has a queer sort of fondness for old Pipe-Stem, who once saved his life, and I've rather an admiration for him myself, because he's so extraordinarily honest."

Percy Rapson wondered why Rippling Water had got up and crept away among the trees. He wondered even more, and so did Dan Medlicott, when an hour went by and Rippling Water did not come back. They called loud and whistled, and at last he came in.

"Where on earth have you been?" cried Dan, reprovingly.

Rippling Water, who was breathing heavily, as if he had been running, caught up a can of cold tea and took a slow drink.

"I've been followin' up the trail of a man who was prowlin' around our camp," he explained. "I headed him off at last, way back of the bluff there, and, hiding, I caught sight of his face as he passed close beside me."

"What? Medicine Pipe-Stem?" cried Dan.

"No," answered Rip. "It was Josh Casterley."

"Impossible, absolutely impossible!" protested Percy Rapson. "Josh is in prison at Broken Knee. He won't be at liberty for a good three years yet."

Rippling Water put down the empty can.

"Say, I don't believe in ghosts," he averred, "and I ain't asleep. That was Josh Casterley, sure!"

Both Dan and Percy doubted the possibility that Josh Casterley could be at large. But Antoine was silent, and in the morning, while the awakening birds were twittering in the tree-tops, he made the circuit of the camp. At breakfast he looked across to Percy Rapson.

"De fader of Rip he was ver' fine scout," he said. "Rip, also, he ver' fine scout. He nevaire mek meestake. He say he vill mek to see Josh in face? Ver' well. I tink he see heem, sure."

During the whole of that next day there was no sign of Josh Casterley, nor of Medicine Pipe-Stem. For two delicious days the canoe was paddled or allowed to drift among the islands and into shady creeks—creeks that were like Devonshire lanes for the richness of their green beauty. At night an encampment was made on some wooded islet or at the foot of some steep mountain cliff.

On the fourth day, in the heat of the afternoon, they were resting at the mouth of a wide creek which they had not yet explored. Percy Rapson was reading in the canoe, Dan Medlicott had just dressed himself after a bathe, Antoine was boiling water for tea, and Rippling Water had strolled in among the timber gathering wild raspberries. Dan heard his name called.

"Guess Rip has found somethin'," he conjectured. "Let's go and see what it is."

Percy and Antoine accompanied him, and they discovered Rippling Water standing with his hands on his knees contemplating the moist ground beside a tiny rivulet.

"What have you found—gold?" cried Percy. "Or is it the trail of some new and wonderful animal?"

"It's the trail of a man wearin' moccasins," Rip announced. "Reckon we might as well follow it up. Looks as if there was a camp somewhere near. I found some tobacco-ash where a pipe had been knocked out way back there."

Antoine stood up and sniffed at the air, then shook his head and glanced down at the footmark.

"Dat snail wot leave hees track dere was pass two t'ree night ago," he decided.

"Yes," nodded Rippling Water, "the trail's an old one. And I don't smell fire. Guess we'll follow it up though."

A few paces farther on he stopped and looked down at the grass where some ants were busy. From among the ants he picked up the brown core of an apple, scored by the marks of teeth.

"Yes, yes, *mon garçon*, you mek ver' fine scout," smiled Antoine.

Rip went onward very quickly now. The trail in the grass was clear, but he had ceased to examine it. He walked upright and went unerringly, looking only at the trees which formed an open lane in front of him.

Suddenly he drew to a halt and, turning to Percy Rapson, said: "There's his teepee. But I guess he's not at home."

Percy Rapson now went in advance of his companions. The smoke-grimed wigwam stood in the middle of a sheltered hollow surrounded by young larch trees. In front of it were the black remains of a fire, with a pot hanging over them suspended from a tripod of larch limbs. An Indian's blanket hung from the bough of a maple, against which there leant a gun and a quiver of arrows.

"How!" shouted Percy, expecting the Redskin to emerge from under the door-flap of the wigwam.

There was no response to his salutation, and all was silent but for the musical tinkle of a stream near by. He turned to Rippling Water.

"Have a look inside, Rip, and see if he's asleep," he ordered.

Rip went forward silently. He drew aside the skin flap of the doorway and looked within, but stepped back with a cry of horror.

Percy, Dan, and Antoine ran up to him.

"Say, it's Medicine Pipe-Stem, sure!" he said in a half whisper. "But we're too late. Look!"

All three of them peered within the wigwam over his shoulder, and what they saw was the body of an Indian lying on his back with his arms stretched out and a knife in his heart.

CHAPTER XV

WHO IS THE WHITE MAN ?

It was Percy Rapson who broke the long spell of silence which had fallen upon him and his three companions as they gazed in horror upon the Indian lying so terribly still within the gloom of his lonely woodland wigwam.

"This is what Sergeant Silk expected," he said gravely. "He knew by some means or other that Medicine Pipe-Stem was being tracked by an enemy who wanted to put him out of the way. I wonder who the enemy can have been! Some Indian that had a long-standing spite against him, I suppose. And now he has taken his revenge; for this isn't the result of any fight or accident. It has been done in cold blood."

Antoine, passing in front of him, bared his head and reverently crossed himself as he went within the lodge. He carefully avoided stepping upon the ground that lay directly between the entrance and the dead Indian, lest he should tread out any marks or signs which might presently serve as clues to explain how the crime had been committed. Going round in a crouching attitude, and then stepping across, he stooped and touched one of the lifeless Indian's hands, felt for a pulse, opened one of the eyelids and peered into the dull, glassy eye, watched by the three boys.

"It's a pity we didn't happen to come along on this side of the lake at first," regretted Percy. "We might have prevented this, as Silk hoped that we should."

"Ah, but no, m'sieu!" said Antoine. "It was not possible we prevent eet. Pipe-Stem 'ave been dead quite long tam—two, t'ree day, per'aps a week."

Turning his back to the boys so that they should not see what he did, he withdrew the fatal weapon.

"*Tiens!*" he muttered as he concealed it beneath the folds of the Indian's leather jacket. "Dat is ver' curious!"

"Curious?" questioned Dan Medlicott. "What is it that is so curious, Antoine?"

The half-breed shrugged his shoulders, and, rising to his feet, stood looking down at the loose dry sand that formed the floor of the wigwam.

"It doesn't look as if there had been any struggle," observed Percy Rapson, glancing also at the ground. "I expect the other chap stole in at night, while Medicine Pipe-Stem was asleep and had no chance to defend himself."

"See," said Rippling Water, pointing downward to the Indian's belt. "He didn't even have time to draw his own knife. And his tomahawk is hangin' from the tree outside, beside his gun. But I don't think he was asleep, because there's his bunk far in out of the draught, and he hadn't brought in his blanket, or lighted the wigwam fire to keep him warm."

Percy acknowledged that his inference was probably correct.

"Yes," he said. "And I say, mustn't that Indian have had a tremendous hatred of him to follow on his track all the way to this outlandish place!"

Rip glanced at him dubiously.

"Say, did Sergeant Silk tell you sure that it was an Indian?" he inquired.

Percy shook his head and moved away from the threshold. Dan and Rip followed him to the side of the black patch of ashes over which the cooking-pot still hung. All three of them had felt uncomfortable in the near presence of the dead body.

"No," Percy answered. "Silk told me nothing to indicate who the enemy might be. I'm not sure that he himself was certain. But you wouldn't expect a white man to have such a desperate spite against an Indian as to track him for days and days for the sake of taking his revenge in this way."

"Perhaps not," Rip admitted, bending over and looking into the cooking-pot, sniffing as he did so. "But I was thinkin' that an Indian would hardly have left his weapon behind him. He wouldn't naturally have used a knife rather than a club, a tomahawk, a gun, or an arrow; and I'm not sure that he'd be satisfied with just killin' his victim. He'd mutilate him, sure; even if he didn't take his scalp; and I reckon he'd carry off a few things. Say, an Indian wouldn't have left a tobacco pipe lyin' around, or a rifle or a blanket, as a white man would."

Antoine, coming out of the teepee with his eyes bent upon the ground, went past the three boys like a hound on a hot scent. He presently disappeared among the trees.

"You see," continued Rippling Water, looking down and treading his moccasined foot upon a fish bone, breaking it under

the pressure, "since we started on this canoe trip, we ain't come upon any signs of Injuns prowlin' around. But I guess we have seen a suspicious-lookin' white man—or, at least, one of us has."

Dan Medlicott looked up sharply, with quick apprehension.

"Sure!" he exclaimed. "You mean Josh Casterley, the horse thief?"

Rip nodded. Percy Rapson gave his head a toss of incredulity.

"Josh Casterley?" he repeated. "That's all rot. You know very well that Josh Casterley is in prison. Rip couldn't have seen him. He must have made some mistake. Josh has certainly not been let out yet; and, of course, he couldn't have escaped. Convicts don't escape from Canadian prisons. Besides, what grudge could Josh have had against a harmless redskin like Medicine Pipe-Stem?"

"Dunno," responded Dan, to whom the question was addressed. "You know Josh heaps better'n I do, I guess; and you mustn't forget that Medicine Pipe-Stem had turned King's evidence, and was a witness against him at the trial. That in itself was enough to make Casterley anxious to get even with him."

"It's a pity Sergeant Silk isn't here to investigate it," Percy regretted. "He's about the best detective in the Force. He'd soon get on the criminal's track, red man or white man. But we might do something ourselves in the meantime, mightn't we? The criminal, whoever he is, must have left some sort of clue that we could follow up. I wonder how he came, and how he went away—on horseback, by canoe, or on foot?"

"By canoe, sure," Rippling Water promptly determined. "He'd hardly ride or walk in pursuit of a man who was travellin' by water, an' might have pitched his tent on one of the islands."

"That's reasonable," admitted Percy. "But," he objected, "you don't know that Medicine Pipe-Stem was provided with a canoe. None of us has seen it."

Rip looked aside towards the trees beyond which Antoine had disappeared.

"There's his paddle, anyway, standin' against the trunk of that larch tree," he pointed out. "Guess Antoine has gone ter look for the canoe."

Percy Rapson took out his cigarette case, but restraining his inclination for a smoke, promptly closed it and returned it to his pocket.

Rippling Water strode slowly back towards the wigwam, and, flropping his hat at the threshold, went inside. Through the open dap of the entrance Dan Medlicott could see him on his hands and

knees searching along the sandy floor. Watching him, he noticed him taking hold of the dead Indian's left hand and looking at it with curious scrutiny.

Wondering what it was about the hand that so closely engaged Rip's attention, Dan went nearer. Rip signed to him, and he timidly entered.

"What have you found?" he asked.

For answer Rippling Water drew from the clenched fingers a very long black hair.

"Say, this don't look anyways like Josh Casterley's hair," he said. "It's too long. It's too black. It's too coarse."

Bending down, Dan saw that there was a considerable quantity of hair entwined about the dead Indian's fingers, which clutched it tightly.

"Perhaps it's his own," Dan suggested.

"'Tain't Josh Casterley's, anyhow," returned Rip with decision. "Also I reckon Josh would wear boots an' not moccasins. Look along the ground. There's no boot marks there, sure—exceptin' your own that you've just made. But the man that took the life of Medicine Pipe-Stem didn't come in by the way you've just come, in any case," he continued thoughtfully. "Stand out of your own light an' look behind, there. You'll see the marks of his knees an' the toes of his moccasins where he crept in from under the cover where it isn't pegged down between the posts, see? That's how he sneaked in, I reckon."

Dan examined the unmistakable marks made by a pair of knees in the loose sand, and the long furrows where the feet had dragged.

"Sure," he agreed. "Say, I wonder if Antoine noticed that track!"

"Nothing escapes Antoine," returned Rip. "He even noticed that tobacco pipe lyin' over there on the floor, an' saw that it hadn't been lighted. Don't think he caught sight of this hair, though. It was the other hand that he looked at when he came in."

"Say, it's a good thing that you didn't miss it, too," observed Dan. "We might have gone off in search of the wrong man altogether, huntin' a white man 'stead of an Injun."

"Likely," said Rip, rising to his feet and slowly returning to the open air.

Percy Rapson was going to and fro in the clearing searching for the prints of boots with soles and heels. Dan called him before following Rippling Water round to the rear of the wigwam.

When Percy joined them, Rip was standing meditatively looking down at the ground where it had been scooped away from beneath the hem of the lodge cover. It was as if some animal had been burrowing a way into the teepee.

"What does it mean?" questioned Percy in perplexity.

"It's where the chap got in," Dan told him.

"Queer!" muttered Percy. "He might have got in so easily by the front entrance."

Rip then went down on his hands and knees and, lifting the skin cover very cautiously, pushed his head within the lodge.

Creeping out again and rising he stood silent for some moments.

"Well?" urged Percy Rapson.

Rippling Water smoothed his ruffled hair and dusted the sand from his jacket and knees before he spoke.

"I can see how it was done," he said. "Guess we needn't hang around here any longer. Guess we may as well push along and send a message ter Sergeant Silk."

"How was it done?" questioned Percy. "I'd like to know."

"Medicine Pipe-Stem wasn't asleep," explained Rip. "It was evenin', Medicine Pipe-Stem had been out fishin' on the lake in his canoe, and had caught a small salmon and had brought it home strung by a thong of leather to the blade of his paddle. He'd boiled the tail half of it, seasoned with wild thyme, for his supper. He was tired—too tired t' put away his fishin' tackle or to clean out his kettle; so when he'd had his supper he sat down, just inside the doorway of his lodge, t' have a smoke an' to think, while he watched the moon risin' above the mountains an' sendin' a track of silver across the lake."

Rip was leaning against a tree bole while he spoke, and his own eyes were upon the lake, which could be seen through the larches. Percy Rapson thought he was romancing, but he was keeping strictly to the facts as far as his reasoning revealed them to him.

"He had filled his pipe," he went on dreamily, "but he wasn't in any hurry t' git up an' go out to the fire and light it. Maybe, as he sat there lookin' through the trees at the glistenin' lake, he heard the sound of a foot tread on the soft carpet of pine-needles. Maybe his sharp eyes caught a movement in among the scrub. But if he heard anythin', or saw anythin', he didn't stir. I just guess he never suspected that any human c'd be anyways near him, an' he sat there meditatin' in the moonlight, holdin' his pipe across his knees, with a finger pressin' the tobacco down in the bowl.

"If anybody was watchin' him, waitin' t' crawl up to him an' do him harm, he must sure have kept very still, very silent. A movin' shadow would have been seen. No one could have got near him unobserved in the light of the moon; an' I reckon his enemy knew this—knew that his only way t' git at his victim was ter go round among the shadows, creepin', creepin', quiet as a cat, an' crawl in by the back of the wigwam, same as I did just now."

"Yes," commented Dan. "Guess it takes an Injun ter stalk an Injun, an' take him unawares."

"That's what was done," resumed Rip. "An' when Medicine Pipe-Stem was suddenlyseized from behind an'flung backward, he dropped his pipe, threw up his hands, an' clutched at his enemy's hair. You c'n guess how it was done. He hadn't a chance t' defend hisself. And there he was left, just as we found him."

Dan Medlicott and Percy Rapson wondered at the completeness of Rip's inductions. They could not disagree with them, for indeed he had told them nothing that they might not have discovered for themselves from observations and reasoning, helped by imagination.

"What I fail to understand," said Percy, "is how you found out that he'd been fishing and had caught a salmon? You must just have invented that about his carrying the fish home dangling from his canoe paddle."

Rippling Water showed his white teeth in a smile as he shook his head.

"That is simple enough," he responded. "Where there is plenty of fish, he would not eat one that was not fresh. It is best to fish in the evening. I looked into his kettle there, hangin' over the black ashes, and saw two or three salmon scales on the side of it, with a sprig of wild thyme floatin' in the scum, which still smells of fish. Also, I noticed the tail half of the bone lyin' where Medicine Pipe-Stem had thrown it towards the fire, when he had cleared it of flesh. The whole salmon was too big to go in the pot, so he cut it in two, leavin' the head and shoulder hangin' from the blade of his paddle, where you c'n see it now, half eaten by the flies."

He turned at the sound of a footstep behind him.

"Say, Antoine, have you located his canoe down there?" he inquired as the half-breed appeared in sight.

Antoine dropped the fag-end of the cigarette he had been smoking.

"But, yes," he answered lightly. "In de crick I 'ave certainly

fin' canoe; but no de one which belong Medicine Pipe-Stem. I t'ink some fella 'e mek exchange for tek de better one."

"Say, did you find anythin' b'longin' to him in the one he left?" Rip questioned.

"Inside it, no," Antoine responded. "But outside it, yes. On de groun' I fin' de footprint of de boots."

"Oh!" said Rippling Water in surprise. "That sure means that the Indian wasn't alone. His companion—a white man—waited behind, lettin' the other do the dirty work. And they both went away in their victim's canoe, leavin' their own."

"Sure," nodded Antoine. "Their own it leak ver' bad. I tink dey steal it of some *pauvre* trapper down de lak'."

He strode past the three boys, and gathering the dead Indian's gun, blanket, bow and arrows, and other properties, carried them into the wigwam. Then he closed and pegged the doorflap.

"Now I tink we go right away for tell de police," he suggested, looking at Percy Rapson.

"If you've found out all that there is to be found," Percy agreed, "let us go, by all means."

As they were returning to the creek, Antoine led them aside to let them see the canoe that he had discovered.

"Why," exclaimed Dan Medlicott at sight of it, "that's the derelict tub that we saw the other evenin' in Red Willow Creek, where we made our first camp. I know it by that patch of tin on the side."

Rippling Water went nearer to the canoe and looked down at the moist soil beside it. He turned to Antoine.

"You never told us you'd seen footprints like these anywhere else, Antoine," he remarked.

"Ah?" smiled Antoine, who had been watching him. "You, also, you remember dem? How you s'pose you know dem? Where you see dem 'fore?"

Rip drew back.

"Guess I know them by the same signs as you do," he answered. "The left boot has three nails missin'; right boot's worn down at the heel. Where did I see them before? Why, back of Red Willow Creek, after Josh Casterley'd gone by. That is, supposin' it was sure Josh Casterley that I followed that night, which some of you seem to doubt."

"Pardon," protested Antoine, "I 'ave nevaire doubt you, *mon garçon*. You 'ave mek no meestek. Eet was Josh who leave deese footprints, I assure you, absolutely."

"Still harping on Josh Casterley, you fellows?" interposed

Percy Rapson. "Why do you persist? He's in prison, I tell you; and your notion that he's touring around Lake Minnewanka as if he were on a holiday is all tommy rot."

"Anyhow," added Dan Medlicott, examining the footprints in his turn, "the chap who's with that Indian is certainly a white man. You never see a Redskin wearin' heavy boots like those. But I suppose we shall never know. He must be miles and miles away from here by now, because Antoine makes out that it was quite three nights ago that he was here. I vote we make for the nearest police depot and give information."

Antoine led the way along the banks of the creek to where they had left their canoe, and they paddled out into the lake as the sun was setting.

They had intended to make camp on one of the islands, but their plans were now wholly disturbed, and they determined to spend the night in the canoe, taking turns at the paddles and making for the western end of the lake, whence they could reach the police post at Bankhead.

CHAPTER XVI

ON THE HORSE THIEF'S TRAIL

It was midnight on Lake Minnewanka. Dan Medlicott and Percy Rapson were at the paddles, and finding their work difficult in the high wind and the driving rain. Occasional flashes of lightning broke the black darkness, and the thunder pealed and rolled and echoed alarmingly among the mountains.

"You may say what you like about Canadian canoes," Percy objected, as he struggled with his paddle on the windward side. "They're all very well in calm weather when you want to rot about on a picnic up some quiet creek; but on a wild dark night like this—if we've got to be out on the water at all—give me a sensible, clinker-built English boat that doesn't wobble and threaten to topple over on the slightest provocation; give me oars that you can pull, instead of these beastly paddles that twist you all on one side."

"Don't you think you're makin' too much of a business of it?" said Dan from behind him. "You dip your blade too deep an' give yourself heaps more work than you need do."

"Perhaps you want me to catch a crab and upset the whole show," retorted Percy with some irritation. "I don't think I need much teaching about how to manage a boat."

A very vivid flash of lightning, followed by an unusually terrific peal of thunder, put a stop to conversation for a while.

"We ought never to have started. That's the fact of the matter," complained Percy, bending his head to meet the drenching rain. "Those clouds rolling down the mountains were a sure sign of a storm. We ought to have stopped ashore, and we'd better pull for land now, before it gets worse—if it is capable of getting worse. We've got into a fine mess, coming out here into the very wildest part of the lake."

"Say, I don't reckon that any of us would have come if you yourself hadn't been so eager," said Dan. "But you're the

captain of this round-up, and of course we yielded. Antoine warned you that a storm was sure comin' on."

Antoine was busy with the baling can, keeping the water low in the bilge, so that it would not reach the stores under the tarpaulin. He paused in his work.

"S'pose you 'ave de wish, m'sieu, I tek you place for work de paddle," he proposed. "You tek de shelter."

"No," Percy stubbornly resolved. "I'll stick into it for a bit. I'm wet through already. I can't get wetter, and it's dangerous to change places in a rickety craft like this. How far are we from land?"

Antoine emptied a full can over the side.

"Two mile, t'ree mile, per'aps," he answered.

"Say, there's a island nearer than that," Rippling Water interposed from the prow, where he was kneeling under the tent canvas on the look out. "I saw it, green as grass, in the last flash of lightning. It's right ahead of us. We might get ashore there, maybe."

The two rowers worked hard at their paddles.

"I don't see anything of your island yet, Rip," said Percy Rapson, after a long spell of labour. "Are you sure you saw one?"

"Yes," Rip answered with decision. "I'm keepin' my eye on the place. I guess that last flash struck one of the trees or somethin'. I c'n make out a kind of glow of light, as if wood was burnin'. An' I c'n smell smoke."

Antoine got up on his knees and peered forward through the rain and the black darkness. He was disposed to be jealous whenever Rippling Water discovered anything before he had himself detected it.

"No," he said, speaking over the shoulders of Percy and Dan. "De las' flash heem strike for oder side de mountain. You mek meestek dis tam, *mon enfant*. Ah!" he paused, looking searchingly into the rain mist. "Pardon, Reep, I tink you got sure good nose. I also I smell de smok for de wood. I also see one tam de glow for fire."

"Looks t' me like as it was a camp fire," added Dan Medlicott. "Say, boys, we'd best go cautiously." He poised his paddle. "We don't need ter go plungin' inter the clutches of those two chaps that did for Medicine Pipe-Stem."

If there is one advantage that a canoe possesses over a rowing boat, it is that it may be propelled in perfect silence without the thumping of rowlocks or creaking of tholepins. Neither

Dan nor Percy made a sound as they dipped their paddles, and the canoe glided forward in swift obedience to their measured strokes.

A flash of lightning revealed the island much nearer to them than they had supposed; but the camp fire was hidden from them by the thick mass of trees and intervening rocks. Presently, however, as they came under the leeside of the islet, they saw the red glow of a fire upon a ragged film of smoke, and against the glow was the black figure of a man, sitting with his head bent forward under the cover of a blanket.

"An Indian!" whispered Percy Rapson, drawing in his paddle.

"There's more'n one," muttered Dan Medlicott. "We'd best quit."

Rippling Water crept back from the prow, and taking hold of Percy's paddle began to drive the canoe nearer to the bank of reeds and rocks.

"Wait!" he cautioned, as the canoe's cutwater crunched against the shingle at the roots of an overhanging willow.

Very silently he laid the paddle across a fold of canvas, then, reaching forward, he caught at a branch of the tree to steady himself while he stepped over the side into the water, wading knee-deep towards the bank.

Percy Rapson seized another branch, and was drawing the canoe inward when he overbalanced himself. The canoe went from under him and he fell with a splash.

Instantly from among the nearer trees there came the sharp crack of a pistol-shot, followed by a man's voice calling out in challenge:

"Who goes?"

No one answered. Rippling Water had concealed himself behind a tree. Antoine was occupied in keeping the canoe in shore, and Dan Medlicott was engaged in helping Percy Rapson to clamber out from a tangle of reeds and roots.

Looking up as a vivid flash of lightning illumined his surroundings, Dan saw a tall man fling himself upon Rippling Water, seizing him from behind. The man's head and figure were hidden under the folds of a cloak or blanket, and whether he was a white man or red man Dan could not have told.

But presently a second man ran up from the direction of the fire, carrying a lighted lantern.

"What's up?" he demanded of his companion. "What's all the row?"

"All right, Sergeant," answered the other, pushing Rip before

him into the light of the swinging lantern. "I've nabbed one of them. It's that same lot come back, sure, ter steal something else."

"No, it isn't the same lot," cried the one with the lantern, as he flashed the light into Rip's face. "Don't you see who it is? What did you want to fire your gun for, before you knew? It's young Rippling Water, from your own ranch, that you've been trying to wing."

"Good glory! Is it?"

"Why cert'nly," laughed Sergeant Silk. "How do, Rip? This is a fine time of night to pay a call. Are you alone? How did you track us to here?"

On hearing Sergeant Silk's voice, Dan Medlicott jumped from the canoe, and, dragging Percy Rapson along with him, made his way up the slope of the bank.

"Hullo, Sergeant! Hullo, Bob!" he cried. "What brings you here? Duty?"

"Why cert'nly," returned Silk, leading the way to the fire, "We're on the trail of a pair of escaped convicts—Casterley and Soaring Eagle. Have you crossed their track anywhere?"

"I say!" exclaimed Percy Rapson. "Then it's true they escaped from prison?"

"Yes," Silk answered. "Some noodle of a gaoler let them slip out of his clutches. We've tracked them to the lake here, but they've got the better of us—very much the better. Say, if you hadn't come along here and rescued us we should have left our bones on this island, and that's sure."

"I don't understand," said Percy. "There's no question of rescue."

"Isn't there, though?" rejoined Silk. "Why, Robinson Crusoe himself was not more completely isolated than we have been for the past two days and nights."

He broke off as Antoine appeared, carrying the tent-pole and canvas.

"Ah, that's good, Antoine," he cried. "And you can bring what grub you've got, too, for you've come to Starvation Camp this time. Have you tied up your canoe safely?"

"But naturally," answered Antoine. "Where is your own? I 'ave not see it anyw'ere."

"I wish you had seen it," said Silk; and, turning to Percy, he added: "That's the explanation of our misfortune. Our canoe has been stolen—stolen and sunk to the bottom of the lake by the rascals we were chasing."

"My fault," intervened Trooper Medlicott. And when Silk had moved away to help Antoine and Rip to pitch the tent, Bob explained.

"You see," he said, "it was my night watch. Sergeant Silk was asleep, and as we were camped here on an island, where I thought we were safe, I lay by the fire reading, and never noticed anything extraordinary until the sergeant suddenly sat up and said: 'What's that noise, Bob?' Then I listened and heard a hammering, and ran across there to the rise to see Casterley and Soaring Eagle banging a hole in the bottom of our canoe, and leaving it to sink, while they paddled off in their own. We fired at them, of course; but before we'd got our guns they were well beyond range. And so we've been stuck here like a pair of marooned seamen ever since. Sergeant had made up his mind to swim for it to-night, and would have done, only this storm came on."

"Say, you boys are wet through, I can see," said Sergeant Silk, turning back from the fire, upon which he had been piling new wood. "Come and dry yourselves here, and tell me how you tracked us. It was good of you to come in this storm."

"We never tracked you at all," explained Dan. "We were on our way to Bankhead to give information about Medicine Pipe-Stem."

Silk looked at him quickly.

"Ah, you found him, did you? You located his lodge? Where?"

"We found him—dead!" said Dan. "Away back up Ghost Pine Creek."

"Dead? Do you mean that Soaring Eagle and Casterley had been there in front of you? I see; yes, I see. No wonder they robbed us of our canoe and corralled us here. They've gained two days by that little game. But they won't escape. We shall have them yet. Though we search the Rocky Mountains from end to end, they shall be caught."

Antoine and Rip were not long in rigging up their bell tent and cooking some food, and while the party of six were eating, all the details of the discovery of Medicine Pipe-Stem were minutely discussed. Now that a canoe was available for crossing the lake to the mainland, Sergeant Silk was anxious to make an early start in pursuit of the two fugitive convicts; but he decided to wait until daylight.

At about two o'clock in the morning the storm ceased, and with the first streak of dawn Silk and Bob Medlicott were busily

cleaning out the canoe and packing up. There was a fear that the canoe would not be large enough to carry six passengers and all the camp outfit, and that they would have to make two journeys; but Silk had a genius for packing things into the smallest possible compass, and as the wind had fallen, and the lake had become fairly calm, he determined to make the one journey serve.

With four paddles at work, they crossed the two miles of water that had separated them from the nearest point of the mainland, and here Trooper Medlicott was to be put ashore with instructions to go on foot to Bankhead and telegraph to the North-West Mounted Police depot at Calgary, giving information of the murder of Medicine Pipe-Stem by the two escaped convicts, and asking for the help of a squad of constables.

His way would lie across a corner of the Stoney Indians' Reserve, where it was likely that Soaring Eagle would have friends, and, lest any accident should happen, Sergeant Silk decided that Bob should not go alone. Rippling Water should accompany him.

Nor was this precaution unnecessary.

Armed only with their revolvers, the two messengers went at scout's pace through a deep gorge and into the wild recesses of Minnewanka Pass. They were not purposely looking for signs of the fugitives, and once when they came upon the track of a horse they took only casual notice of it. But at the head of the Pass they sighted the rider himself, posted on the crest of a rise, intently watching their approach.

"It's an Indian," announced Rippling Water. "Looks to me as if he'd been spying on us comin' ashore from the canoe. Are you goin' to face him?"

"Why not?" returned Trooper Medlicott. "They're peace Indians around here."

When they drew nearer, the Indian rode down to the level ground and waited. Rip's sharp eyes recognised him, and he said in an undertone:

"Say, it's Soaring Eagle himself, sure. Guess he has stolen that pony somewhere, and he's got a gun across his back. You goin' t' capture him?"

"I'm going to try," answered Trooper Bob. "But as he's mounted, we haven't a very lively chance."

When the two came within hearing, Soaring Eagle unslung his gun and called out to Rip, who was leading, to advise the policeman to go away.

"If he does not go away," said Soaring Eagle, "I shall shoot."

Bob Medlicott had his orders, which were to arrest Soaring Eagle, escaped prisoner, and he had no option but to go forward. So, bidding Rip tell the Indian to surrender, he strode slowly on, holding up his right hand as a sign of peace. His left was gripping his revolver, ready for action, if need be.

A second warning came from the Indian. Then, seeing the policeman still advancing upon him, Soaring Eagle became desperate. Levelling his gun at Bob Medlicott's face, he called out:

"Stay right where you are, and throw me your cartridge belt. If you don't, I will kill you!"

Bob Medlicott made no answer. He realised the situation. Soaring Eagle was short of ammunition. Every cartridge he had was precious. Would he risk a shot now? Perhaps his rifle was not loaded.

Rippling Water, standing by Medlicott's side, said:

"Shall I draw a bead on him?"

"No," protested Bob. "No, you mustn't—unless he shoots first."

It is a point of honour among the North-West Mounted Police never to shoot if there is a chance of taking a prisoner alive.

"Throw me your cartridge belt," commanded the Indian, still with his finger twitching on the trigger of his levelled rifle. It was evident that he recognised Bob as the trooper who had been at Josh Casterley's secret ranch in disguise, and who had helped to send him to prison, and he well knew that he could hope for no mercy at the hands of the Riders of the Plains who were now on his trail.

"Say, he's meanin' to shoot," whispered Rippling Water, who had detected the look of determination in the Indian's eyes. "Why don't you fire—or let me?"

Soaring Eagle held out his left hand to catch the belt, while with his right he still held his gun pointed.

"Throw me your belt, or I will kill you," he repeated.

Then Bob Medlicott spoke, gripping his revolver as he did so.

"Never!" he said.

And the Indian fired.

Even before the flash spurted from his gun barrel, Rippling Water had leapt forward. The bullet tore a hole through the brim of his wide felt hat, but struck the trooper behind him. Soaring Eagle's horse, startled by the shot, plunged off with a wild gallop. Rip ran in pursuit, firing as he ran, instead of standing

to take aim, and every shot went wide, while Soaring Eagle raced away unharmed up the slope of the hill, far out of range.

When Rippling Water returned, he was astonished to see Trooper Medlicott lying in a helpless heap on the ground.

"Say, are you hurt, then?" he cried in alarm. "Did he hit you?"

"Guess I'm more than hurt," moaned Bob, trying to rise, but falling back. "Here, quick, shove your hand in my pocket and take out the sergeant's telegram. Run with it to the depot at Bankhead and get it sent off. Don't mind me."

Rip saw an ominous dark stain on the scarlet of Bob's tunic.

"I'm not going before I know you're sure safe to be left alone," he demurred, dropping on his knees and searching for the slip of paper. Having found it, he transferred it to his own pocket, and stood up to glance round at the escaping Indian, who was now racing along the ridge of the hill, looking back at the apparently dead trooper, and waving his gun exultantly as he yelled a triumphant war-whoop.

CHAPTER XVII

CORNERED !

It was clear that Soaring Eagle believed that Bob Medlicott was killed outright. In his backward glance as he rode away he had seen the red-coated constable lying inert on the ground with the young Indian bending guiltily over him, evidently occupied in stealing something from his pocket.

Soaring Eagle's gun was empty, and he had no more ammunition, or he would have galloped back to silence Rippling Water as he had silenced the policeman. But he had friends at the encampment in the next valley—friends who would give him some rifle cartridges, so that he might presently ride off on the trail of Rippling Water. Having put this inconvenient witness out of the way, he would return to finish his work by hiding the dead body of the constable and concealing the evidence of this most serious crime of killing a representative of the white man's law.

Rippling Water watched him as he disappeared over the crest of the hill.

" Are you hurt badly ? " he questioned, again going down on his knees at Bob Medlicott's side.

" Badly ? Well, I don't just know," Bob answered, attempting to rise, but dropping back again. " Not too badly to crawl away into cover in case that skunk comes back to take my scalp. Say, Rip, why don't you cut off with that message ? You can see I'm not fit to go any farther with you on foot, though I'd be right enough if we'd a horse. Go on. Don't mind me."

Rip was uncertain what he should do—whether he should stay here with his wounded companion, follow on the trail of Soaring Eagle, run back to the lake in the hope of finding Sergeant Silk, or go at once to Bankhead with the sergeant's message. Each one of these duties was too important to be neglected. But in the meantime Bob Medlicott was wounded. His injury seemed to be serious, and he must be attended to immediately.

Rip was already busy unbuckling Bob's belt. Quickly opening his tunic and the blood-stained flannel shirt beneath it, he bared the left side of his chest where the bullet had scored a ragged furrow in the flesh.

"Sit up, if you can, while I pull off your jacket," he said, gently lifting Bob by the back of the shoulders. "I can see what has happened. The shot has glanced off one of your ribs, and gone into your arm. The arm's the worst, I believe. It's bleedin' badly."

With difficulty he removed the tunic. Then taking out his knife he cut off the shirt-sleeve at the shoulder and drew it off, disclosing a gruesome wound in the thick part of the arm. Very dexterously he ripped the shirt-sleeve into strips and made a long bandage, which he tied tightly above the wound with a stone enclosed to press upon the severed artery.

By the time he had done this, Bob had become very white and faint, and Rip gave him a drink from his water-bottle before attempting to deal with the less serious wound in his chest.

"D'you reckon you could stand up, now?" he asked when the operation was finished and the injuries were dressed.

Weak though he was from loss of blood, Bob Medlicott struggled to his feet, and, supported by Rip's arm about him, he managed to cross a wide stretch of buffalo grass to the shelter of a clump of elder bushes at the farther side of a wide, shallow creek.

Rip led him along the stream for a considerable distance, wading ankle-deep so that they might leave no betraying tracks behind. From the water to the bushes he carried him on his back, and was careful when helping him into cover not to break any of the branches or leaves.

"I shall be all right here for a bit," Bob decided. "Open my water-bottle, give me my revolver, shove my tunic out of sight, and then slip away. Say, do you think you can find me again?"

"Sure," nodded Rip. "But I guess nobody else will when I've wiped out the trail. What will you do, supposin' I don't come back?"

Bob Medlicott shook his head.

"Don't know," he answered. "Time enough to think of that when I've given you up. And that won't be inside of three days. I'll give you three days, Rip."

"Three hours are more likely," Rip assured him. "If I'm not back here before sundown, you may reckon I'm not comin' back at all, and you can send word to Sergeant Silk to come and fetch you."

Bob looked at him queerly.

" How d'you expect me to do that ? " he questioned feebly.

Rip was silent for a moment or two.

" At a pinch," he said presently, " you could do it. You see, this creek runs down to Lake Minnewanka. It's the same creek where we landed from the canoe. Sergeant Silk has fixed to meet us at the same place when he comes back from havin' a look at the wigwam of Medicine Pipe-Stem. You could put a note in your water-bottle and let it be carried down. That's one way. Another is to send a procession of twigs from these elder bushes floatin' down, with a strip of your red tunic fixed in a cleft in each twig. If Sergeant Silk should find one of those twigs, I guess he's cute enough to know you wouldn't cut up your tunic for fun. He'll come up stream in search of you, sure, and you may lay he'll look for you among elder trees."

Bob watched him as he made his way slowly down to the stream, carefully wiping out his trail as he went. He saw Rip stop and pluck a few blades of grass, which he buried under a stone, then again stoop to pick up a stone and throw it into the creek. At the side of the creek, where they had both stood for a while, he picked up many stones and cast them into the stream, moving others from place to place, thus removing or covering all traces of blood.

For a long time he was out of sight as he waded up the creek ; but Bob saw him again on the farther side, once more occupied in covering the trail. He seemed to be gathering many stones and tufts of grass. Bob wondered why ; but soon discovered an explanation when Rip began to plant them at long intervals in a line leading off from the direction which the original trail had taken.

Rip was cunningly laying a false scent. He could not hope to cover or successfully disguise the signs left at the place where they had encountered Soaring Eagle—the thickly trodden grass and the stains of blood—so he was leaving them undisturbed.

Bob's sight became misty as he watched, and his brain reeled. He lay over on his right side, holding his wounded arm above his head to stay the bleeding and keep the bandage tight. He felt very faint and sick, and he closed his eyes to shut out the glare of the sunlight and the dizzy whirl of the branches and leaves.

For a long time he lay unconscious of everything but the dull throbbing pain in his chest and arm and the singing in his ears ; and when at length he again looked out through the curtain of

leafy branches that enclosed him, Rippling Water was nowhere to be seen.

Bankhead was some eighteen miles away, beyond the mountains in the blue distance, and it must be many hours before Rip could come back to his help. There would be no use in watching for him. The only thing to do was to lie still and wait.

He tried to sleep, but his wounded arm was becoming numb and lifeless ; he could not move his hand or fingers ; all feeling had gone out of them, so tightly had Rip tied the bandage. He wanted to slacken it, but he knew that it would be dangerous to do so. Rip had said something about an artery being broken, and that was why he had put the stone in the bandage to press upon it. Bob resolved to bear the discomfort and to keep very still.

He did not know how long he had lain there. It seemed like days ; but he knew that he had been asleep. He had awakened with a start, hearing a strange sound. At first he could not make out what it was, but presently it resolved itself into the beating of horses' hoofs.

He tried to sit up ; but all the strength had gone out of him, his temples were throbbing terribly, and the weight of his arm was a load across his chest. He could not move without pain.

The sound was coming nearer and nearer. He listened, trying to discover how many horses there were. At length he decided that there were two, and that their hoofs were not shod. They were Indian horses. Was Soaring Eagle coming back to search for him, to take his scalp ? He felt for his loaded revolver which Rip had left by his side. He gripped it and held it with a finger on the trigger.

The horses had been galloping, but now they had slowed down to a walk. It seemed to him that the Indians were already following on his trail ? Would they be misled by Rip's false scent. He heard them draw to a halt at the side of the creek, and there was silence for a long time.

He listened intently, but could hear nothing but the tinkling of the water over the stones of the creek and the whispering of the leaves around him.

Very slowly he raised himself and sat up to stretch forth his hand and cautiously lift one of the leafy branches to look out. As he did so, a new sound came to him from across the valley. It was the sound of many horses' hoofs, mingled with the voices of men ; and, looking forth from his hiding-place, he was alarmed to see a party of Indians riding down the hill-side directly towards the spot at which Soaring Eagle had waited to confront him.

Bob Medlicott was naturally as courageous as most of the members of the North-West Mounted Police, but it would have been childish for him to suppose that, wounded as he now was, without a horse, and armed only with an Enfield revolver, he had even the faintest chance of escape from half a score of armed and mounted Indians, who had obviously come out in search of him or his dead body. All that he could hope to do was to defend himself to the end, fighting resolutely for the honour of the Force.

Watching them riding slowly down the slope in single file, he saw that the one leading was Soaring Eagle himself, who was directing their movements. They were followed by one who wore the dress of a rancher and rode with saddle and stirrups.

In spite of the mistiness in his eyes, Bob had no difficulty in recognising this man at the rear as Josh Casterley.

All thought of his own immediate danger was for a time overcome by the eager wish that he might gain the coveted credit of capturing these two outlaws. But he knew that this was impossible. He realised, too, that both Josh Casterley and Soaring Eagle, knowing that they had been tracked, must be searching for him and Rip with the intention of preventing them from setting the whole Force upon their trail.

This latter thought made him more and more anxious to escape them, and he drew back into his ambush, lying low and trusting that the false scent which Rippling Water had laid would allure them in a wrong direction.

Suddenly he was startled by a movement among the bushes only a few yards away from him.

Had he been tracked, after all ? Had one of the Indians' advance scouts discovered some sign which Rip had overlooked ?

He gripped his revolver and waited, with all his senses alert. The movement continued. Someone was crawling towards him, inch by inch, making hardly a sound. None but an Indian could approach with such snake-like cunning.

But Bob Medlicott was ready. He watched the bushes being slowly moved aside. Once he caught sight of a ruddy brown hand, then the toe of a moccasin, and he turned his revolver to wait for the Redskin's face to appear. His finger twitched on the trigger, and he was about to fire when a voice spoke in a sharp imperative whisper :

" All right ! Don't shoot. Quick ! come with me ! Get on my back and I'll carry you."

"Rip!" cried Bob in astonishment. "How are you here?"

"Never mind," urged Rip. "There's no time to lose. Quick, I tell you!"

He snatched the constable's tunic from the ground, shoved the neck band between his teeth, turned Bob on his knees, and, putting an arm about him, half dragged, half carried him out to the open.

"Now wait here," he commanded, dropping Bob's tunic and belt. "Wait till I come back."

He ran off then, and Bob watched him dodging from cover to cover, making his way swiftly towards a clump of birches that were partly hidden behind a projecting bank at the side of the creek. Here he disappeared, and before Bob Medlicott could even guess what he was doing, he came out again astride of a barebacked Indian pony, and leading a second pony by a long rope.

As he rode quickly across the open ground there came a wild whoop from the hill at the farther side of the creek. The Indians had seen him, and at once they started off in pursuit.

Rippling Water came to a sharp halt and dismounted, keeping a grip of his pony's halter.

"Quick!" he urged, helping Bob to his feet. "Mind you don't hurt your arm. Get your foot on my knee. Take your time. That's right. Now, over with your other leg while I give you a lift."

Bob got astride without hurt. Rip gave him his revolver and the halter, and flung his tunic and belt in front of him, then mounted the second pony and led off at a gallop.

They were both accustomed to riding in the Indian fashion, barebacked and with the halter instead of bridle, and in spite of his wounds and his weakness Bob Medlicott managed to keep his seat as they raced down the valley, back towards the lake in the direction from which they had come.

Very fortunately the deeper part of the creek was between them and the Indians, who must either swim their horses across or else go round by the shallow fording-place by which Rip had crossed.

But even this necessary delay in their pursuit was quickly made up, and with wild yells they came on behind, shortening the dividing distance with every moment until they were so near that some of them began to fire their arrows, and one tried to stop the fugitives with a rifle-shot.

Rippling Water then dropped behind so that he might watch

his companion and be ready when the Redskins should come within range of his pistol.

Bob Medlicott was riding more steadily now, with his knees pressed close to his pony's sides, his wounded arm held tight against his chest and his right hand gripping the halter. The wind in his face seemed to put life into him, and the broncho he was riding dashed on with full racing speed. But the Indians were coming nearer and nearer. Their arrows were beginning to come with surer aim. One fell in advance of him ; one whistled past Rip's left ear.

Rip turned in his seat and looked back over his shoulder. It was Soaring Eagle who was leading, and Josh Casterley was close behind him. They were followed by three young braves. Their companions had fallen back and were hidden by the shoulder of a hill, round which they were hastening with the intention of heading off the two fugitives. Rip leant over and fired a backward shot, but his pony swerved and he missed.

They were racing now along the ridge of a hill with a downward slope towards the creek, about a mile from where it joined the lake. Rip saw that they must either cross the creek or turn sharply round by the shore of the lake at the peril of being intercepted by the braves who had gone to head them off. He knew that the stream was swollen by the last night's rain, and that it was too deep to be forded.

" Say, we're cornered ! " he cried.

" Sure ! " panted Bob. " There's no crossing. I'm going to turn and face them. Tell me when you're ready."

" I'm ready right now," declared Rip. And he pulled round, paused for a moment, and took deliberate aim as Soaring Eagle came tearing down the slope yelling a menacing war-whoop.

Bob turned at the same moment ; they both fired, and the Indian's broncho reared and fell with a heavy thud. But Soaring Eagle leapt to his feet unhurt and, leaving both his horse and his gun, ran back, while Josh Casterley drew rein and took him up behind him.

Bob Medlicott fired again as the Indian was mounting, but his aim was unsteady and his bullet went wide.

" Quick ! Quick ! " shouted Rip. " This way ! "

He had seen the braves racing round from the farther side of the hill to get between them and the creek. There was not a moment to spare. The only means of escape was by swimming the stream, and if the braves should cut off that retreat they were lost.

"Quick! To the creek!" urged Rip, wheeling his pony round.

But Bob Medlicott hesitated.

"I can't," he faltered. "Say, that bandage has slipped on my arm, and the blood's pumping out. Guess I'm going to faint. Go without me. There's time."

He swayed in his seat, and his revolver fell from his hand. He caught at his pony's mane to steady himself, but Rippling Water was at his side to prevent him from falling by seizing him with his left hand, while with his right he held his weapon ready to fire when Casterley should come within range.

Already the braves were galloping round in a wide ring, shooting their arrows over the heads of their two victims as if to prolong their agony of suspense.

Within the ring, Josh Casterley, with Soaring Eagle mounted behind him, was slowly drawing nearer and nearer, his revolver levelled, covering Rippling Water. He was in no hurry to shoot. He had waited long to take his revenge upon Bob Medlicott, and now that Bob was in his power beyond all possibilty of escape, he was taking his time. He circled round beyond range.

Rip watched him, following his every movement with cold disregard of his own safety, thinking only of protecting his wounded companion the while he kept his pistol ready to fire on the instant when Casterley should come near enough.

Suddenly his eye was attracted by something beyond—something that gleamed red among the green of the bushes at the side of the creek. He had hardly realised what it was when a spurt of white smoke blurred the patch of red, he heard the sharp crack of a rifle-shot, and Casterley's horse plunged forward, stumbled, and rolled over with its hoofs in the air.

Another and another rifle-shot rang out, and there was a wild yell of alarm from the Redskins as they scattered off up the slope.

What happened during the next few minutes Rippling Water could not clearly have told. All that he knew was that the patch of red which he had seen among the bushes was the tunic of Sergeant Silk, and that Sergeant Silk was not alone. There were three guns at work, and one of them at least was picking off a victim every time. But he could not watch to see the result of this sudden and unexpected coming of help. He was occupied with Bob Medlicott.

Bob had slipped from his horse. Rip himself had dismounted. Their two ponies had joined in the stampede and he was left alone, struggling to staunch the flow of blood from Bob's arm.

He was tightening the bandage—twisting it with the handle of his knife—when Sergeant Silk ran up, followed by Dan and Percy.

"That's right," said Silk, going down on his knees. "Hold it tight, while I give him a drink. When was this done ? Not now ? "

"Soon after we left you," Rip answered. "It was Soaring Eagle who did it. Have you caught him, sir ? "

"No," Silk regretted, holding his water-bottle to Bob's lips. "Nor Casterley, neither. The skunks have gone off on those two ponies you were riding and allowed to escape. If you'd kept hold of them, we might have followed."

Bob Medlicott opened his eyes.

"Don't blame Rip, Sergeant," he said feebly. "He couldn't help letting the ponies run off."

"Oh, I don't blame anyone," returned Silk. "You've tracked those fellows, you've found them for us. We shall have them soon enough now."

"But we have not been to Bankhead yet," deplored Rip. "We couldn't get through to send your telegram."

"I can see that," nodded Silk. "Where did you get hold of the mounts ? "

"Guess I stole them," answered Rip. "The constable was wounded. I had to leave him, but I caught the ponies ranging on the pastures near the Reservation, and took them back to where he was hidden. Then we were chased—chased to here, where you rescued us."

Sergeant Silk seemed to understand more than Rip told him.

"Yes," he said. "But you'd have been in a pretty mess riding down into this corner if we hadn't happened to be at hand. You couldn't have crossed the creek. You were done for."

"That is so," returned Rippling Water. "But it seems, somehow, that you always happen to be at hand when you are most wanted."

CHAPTER XVIII

A STERN CHASE

"So, *mon garçon*, you 'ave not succeed for send de telegram, eh ?" said Antoine, looking up from the canoe in which he had been stowing the camp outfit. "You t'ink you try again ?"

"That depends upon Sergeant Silk," returned Rippling Water, who sat on the bank munching a biscuit. "It is possible he would not trust me with the responsibility."

Sergeant Silk lay on his back under the shade of a maple tree. He removed his pipe.

"I would trust you with any responsibility, Rip," he said. "But as it happens, I intend to go myself this time, and leave you and Antoine to keep watch in my absence."

"Oh !" exclaimed Percy Rapson in surprise. "That's a new plan. And what are Dan and I to do ?"

"You are both coming with me," explained Silk.

"Percy will enjoy that," observed Dan, "especially if the journey includes our bein' chased by Redskins. Is that a part of your programme, Sergeant ?"

Silk shook his head.

"I propose to go by way of the lake," he answered. "You see, we are useless on land without horses, and we couldn't hope to capture those two chaps now, even if we knew exactly where to lay our hands on them. They'll be on their guard now that they are certain we've got upon their trail, and naturally they'd try to prevent us from getting reinforcements. If they were alone, we might nab them ; but they've got friends, who will use every subtlety of Indian craft to hide them."

"Say, Sergeant," murmured Bob Medlicott, "I'm afraid I'm a most awful burden to you. I guess you'd have had them if I hadn't bungled and got wounded."

Silk glanced round at him where he lay on the grass with his head and shoulders supported on two of Percy Rapson's silk cushions, his arm neatly bandaged and strapped across his chest.

"I should have done exactly as you did in your place, old chap," the sergeant assured him.

"Is Bob going along with us?" inquired Percy.

"Why, cert'nly," returned Silk. "We must get him to Bankhead right away, and the canoe will be heaps more comfortable for him than the back of a horse."

He stood up and spoke to Antoine, instructing him to leave the tent and cooking-stove on shore, with all things else that would not be needed for a night trip down the lake.

"We needn't take our guns with us, of course?" said Dan, who was helping.

"I think you had better take your revolvers," smiled Silk; "but you can hardly have much use for your sporting rifles. Don't forget your cartridge belts."

It was evening, and they were ready to start. The tent had been pitched and the camp fire lighted, but Sergeant Silk still delayed, and it was not until the afterglow of the setting sun was fading into dusk that he helped Bob Medlicott to the couch of blankets and cushions that had been prepared for him in the stern of the canoe. Then, watched by Antoine and Rip, they paddled silently through the shadows of the creek to where it flowed into the darkening lake. Here they waited until the stars peeped out.

Silk was anxious lest they should be discovered by some watchful Indian scout; for he was sure that Soaring Eagle's friends would be alert, and he wished them to suppose that he was remaining for the night in the camp.

From the mouth of the creek they crept out to the middle of the lake, working their paddles silently. From behind them they could hear Antoine singing to the accompaniment of his guitar. The sound carried far in the quiet of the night. All around them were the black mountains, and here and there on the lake the thickly wooded islands stood out sharply defined against the lesser darkness of the water.

When they came abreast of the island upon which Silk and Bob Medlicott had been isolated by the loss of their canoe, the sergeant arrested his paddle and gazed eastward in search of the glow from the Indians' fires; but he could discern none. He turned to ask Bob a whispered question, but discovered that Bob was asleep.

"This ought to be a ripping fine night for fishing," said Percy Rapson, in a low voice to Dan.

"Be quiet, can't you?" whispered Silk.

To the two boys it seemed strange that he should impose silence when they were so far away from the land. Dan wondered why he was allowing the canoe to drift instead of letting him continue with his work at the paddle. Silk had poised his own paddle across his knees.

Presently, he dipped it, but only to turn the prow of the canoe to the windward. He seemed to be listening, but all that Dan himself could hear was the chirping of an insect on the island close at hand, and the musical ripple of the water along the side of the canoe.

Presently Sergeant Silk bent his head and looked landward along the surface of the lake. When he drew back it was to glance down at his side where his rifle lay, and at the same time to feel at his belt for his revolver. Then gripping his paddle he dipped it, giving a long, slow stroke.

"Now, boys, lay into it!" he commanded, speaking hardly above a whisper.

A dozen strokes brought them beyond the point of the island, and now looking searchingly forward Dan was astonished to discover a canoe in front of them, making across for the western shore of the lake. It was barely a hundred yards away, and its two occupants were working at their paddles with a vigour which betrayed extraordinary haste.

They were not yet aware that they had been seen, for Sergeant Silk had waited until they should have passed, so that their backs should be towards him, and their faces turned in the direction in which they were going. And now he was pursuing them, he himself being at one side, and Percy and Dan against him at the other.

He hailed them.

"Who goes there, in that canoe?" he cried. "Halt!"

Instead of stopping, they quickened their pace.

"Take the other side, Dan," Silk ordered, shipping his paddle, and, kneeling, he took up his gun, while Dan and Percy continued at their work, taking long, well-measured strokes that sent the canoe forward with a splash of spray streaming off from her cut-water.

"D'you hear?" Silk shouted. "Halt, or I'll fire at you!"

There was no response; but it seemed that the fugitives recognised his voice, for Dan Medlicott heard one of them say:

"It's Silk himself!"

Sergeant Silk fired over their heads, and their paddles began

to splash wildly. They pulled away slightly until Silk returned to his work and gradually overhauled them.

Again he called to them to stop, but they were desperate now —so desperate that their strokes became irregular and their frail canoe began to sway from side to side.

Dan had seen all along that the foremost of them was an Indian, skilled and dexterous. The other was already showing fatigue.

"Josh Casterley," cried Silk, "if you don't stop right now I'll shoot you!"

The white man drew in his paddle, but the Indian gave even a stronger stroke than before, and their canoe whirled around and leant suddenly over. His companion lost his balance, and his feet went up in the air. There was a cry, a splash, and then all that could be seen through the darkness was the capsized canoe.

Sergeant Silk laid his paddle aside, and, leaning forward, took up a bull's-eye lantern, switching back the slide.

"Pull up to them, boys," he ordered. "I don't think Josh can swim. Be careful how you deal with him."

He flashed his lantern light along the water when they drew nearer, and saw a pair of white hands clinging to the upturned canoe.

"You can hold on there for a bit, my man," he called out. "We'll come back for you presently."

Soaring Eagle was swimming away with astonishing speed; but Silk was determined not to lose him. He urged the two boys to their utmost, while he searched along the water to keep the Indian's head in sight.

At length they came abreast of him, and he turned his eyes with desperate appeal to the light.

Seeing the Sergeant's red jacket behind it and the gleaming barrel of a revolver pointed at him, he flung up his hands and allowed himself to sink. But before he disappeared, Silk had dropped his revolver behind him, and, leaning carefully over the side, had seized one of the uplifted hands, drawing it to him and swiftly coiling the bight of a rope around the wrist.

"Dead or alive!" he murmured. "Those are my orders."

And towing the captive Indian alongside, he went back for the man whom he believed to be Josh Casterley.

"Back water, Dan!" Sergeant Silk was kneeling at the fore part of the canoe with an arm at full stretch over either side of the prow, straining with tight fingers at the taut rope, while the

swimming Indian, struggling to disentangle himself from the loop drawn tight about his wrist, dragged and tugged in his frantic efforts to escape.

Soaring Eagle was a wonderfully powerful swimmer. He had lost his blanket and was not encumbered by heavy clothing, and he had succeeded in drawing the line out to its full length. He had stopped swimming now, and was trying to free himself before Silk should haul in the slack, hand over hand. By the light of the lantern, which Percy Rapson flashed upon him, they could see him treading the water and working with teeth and nails to loosen the knot.

Dan Medlicott backed the canoe and Silk gave the rope a sudden jerk.

The Indian went under like an otter, swimming back and going beneath the canoe to come up at the other side wriggling and twisting.

Silk played him as one plays a big fish, hoping to exhaust him, pulling in and slackening out as Soaring Eagle swam to and fro, now coming to the surface and now letting himself sink.

Once, when the rope was drawn aft along the gunwale, the canoe was borne over perilously.

"He'll upset us next," cried Percy in alarm. "Why don't you shoot him?"

Sergeant Silk kept very cool. He knew the danger of being capsized out there in the middle of the dark lake, and his anxiety was heightened by his knowledge that Bob Medlicott with his wounded arm could not possibly swim. But he wanted to take Soaring Eagle alive, and, trusting to the security of the knot on the Indian's wrist, he paid out more rope, letting it run through his hands as the swimmer sped off.

Presently the line slackened again, and he pulled it in quickly. This time there was no check, and the loose end of the rope came to his hand with the strands cut. Soaring Eagle had contrived to use his knife, and he was now swimming away free.

"Quick!" urged the sergeant, snatching at the lantern. "He's gone!"

"I see him!" cried Dan, plying his paddle vigorously.

Percy moved cautiously back to his place at the forward thwart, and they both bent to their work so excitedly that the canoe swayed and rocked from side to side, sending off a bubbling track.

"Steady! Steady!" Silk cautioned, holding the lantern between his knees while he coiled the rope over his arm and

made a running noose at its end, the while he still watched and listened as the Indian went forward with a strong side stroke, making hardly a splash apart from the rippling rush of water at his shoulder.

"Say, we shall lose them both if you don't shoot," Dan advised.

Sergeant Silk then took out his revolver and fired, aiming to let the bullet fall as near as possible to the Indian's head without striking it.

As the shot rang out, Soaring Eagle took a rolling dive under. The lantern ray was swept searchingly along the quiet surface. Several moments afterwards he came up again with an audible snort, yards away from the place at which he had disappeared. But Silk seemed to have foreseen his intention, for his light was already glittering on the spot when the Redskin's bare arm and dripping black locks emerged.

Percy took hold of the lantern, keeping its beam fixed steadily outward, while Silk, waiting his chance, threw forth his lasso with a dexterous swing from the shoulder.

The wide open loop shot through the air and fell with a dull splash that made a ring of glistening spray around the Indian's head. Swiftly the rope was drawn in, and there was a sharp check as the noose was tightened, enclosing the Redskin's arm and neck.

Soaring Eagle was effectually captured now. He struggled and plunged to no purpose. Silk dragged him carefully nearer, and, leaning over, seized him and adroitly knotted the lasso behind his shoulder. Lashing the rope to a thwart spar, he handed the bight of it to Bob Medlicott to hold, trusting to Soaring Eagle to keep his head above water while he was being towed close behind.

"You c'n push back for the other chap now, boys," ordered Silk, returning to the bow with the lantern.

Many precious minutes had gone by in this second chase after the fugitive Indian, and he had led them a considerable distance away from the capsized canoe.

"Say, I can't make out where he is," Dan Medlicott declared. "We've been turnin' round and round."

The lake was so dark now that very little could be seen but the black water and the blacker hills, for a heavy mist was over the sky, hiding the glow of the rising moon. But even in the excitement of the chase, Sergeant Silk, like the expert scout that he was, had watched the dim landmarks and noted the varied shapes of the dark surrounding mountains.

"Make for that hill with the three peaks," he directed. "We ought to come somewhere near him if you keep your eye on the middle peak. Lift your paddle, Percy. Go ahead, Dan. Now both of you lay into it."

They dipped their blades in unison and continued rowing for a while.

"Guess I c'n make out that canoe now," Silk announced at length. "Stop her a moment, Dan. That'll do. Yes, he's still clinging to it."

As he spoke, a feeble appealing cry for help came along the water. The two boys sent the craft along with a spurt, which they kept up until the sergeant called to them.

"Steady!" he cried as they came to the overturned canoe. "Ship your oars."

He shot the beam of the bull's-eye upon the man who had by this time succeeded in getting astride of the canoe. He was lying along it with outspread legs and arms. All three of the searchers gazed upon him in astonishment as he slowly turned his terrified face to the light, and even Bob Medlicott raised himself on an elbow to look.

"Why!" exclaimed Sergeant Silk.

"My hat!" cried Percy Rapson. "It isn't Josh Casterley, after all!"

"Say, it's Nosey Foster!" declared Dan. "You didn't know he was cavortin' around Lake Minnewanka, did you, Sergeant?"

"I knew he'd broke prison with Josh and others of his gang," said Silk. "Keep an eye on the Indian and see he doesn't give us the slip."

His warning on this latter point was necessary. When Dan crept aft to his brother's side and looked over the stern of the canoe, Soaring Eagle was already trying to wriggle out of the coils that bound him. He seemed to have lost his knife, but his nimble fingers were busily working at the strands, as he supported himself in the water by a grip of the taut rope between his strong jaws.

"Stop that!" Dan commanded, leaning over and pressing the muzzle of his revolver against the Indian's forehead.

"Wough!" grunted Soaring Eagle, letting the rope drop. And, reaching up, he caught at the gunwale, clinging to it with both hands. "Heap bad!" he added with a shiver.

Dan drew in the slack of the rope and secured it, so that the Indian could not again drop back to swim.

Soaring Eagle raised himself higher until he got his elbows over the side. He tried to get a leg over also, but Dan's weapon was ready to warn him against attempting to enter the canoe.

While they remained thus facing each other, Soaring Eagle caught sight of Constable Medlicott lying in the bottom of the boat with his arm bandaged and in a sling.

"Wough!" he grunted again. "Why you no dead?"

Bob looked up at him with a grim smile.

"Guess I should have been if you'd had your way," he answered. Then he asked abruptly: "Where is Josh Casterley?"

Soaring Eagle narrowed his eyes and was silent for some moments. It seemed to cost him no exertion to hang on to the side of the canoe with his sinewy arms folded across the sharp gunwale and his knees pressed against the bulge of the outer fabric.

"Soaring Eagle is a brave," he presently replied, "and a brave does not put his enemy upon the trail of his friend. Josh is the friend of Soaring Eagle. They are as brothers. They do not betray each other. They know when to be silent."

While he spoke he was watching Sergeant Silk leaning over the prow lifting Nosey Foster into the canoe. Nosey was so exhausted that he could offer no resistance, and Silk was strong. All the help that he needed was given by Percy Rapson.

When the dripping man was pulled safely on board and deposited in front of the forward thwart, Silk took the lantern from Percy and crawled aft. Partly by signs and partly by speech, he ordered Soaring Eagle to rescue the capsized canoe. The Indian understood, and, pulling the rope after him, he dropped back into the water and swam round to obey.

The canoe was a very light one, but it required considerable ingenuity to right it. Soaring Eagle, however, had all the Indian's skill in watercraft, and doubtless the task was not new to him.

"D'you suppose he c'n turn it over all by himself?" questioned Dan Medlicott.

"Why, cert'nly," Silk nodded. "You just watch to see how he does it. He'll give you a useful lesson."

The Indian caught at the frail boat's prow with both hands, pressing upon it until its farther end was raised high above the surface. Very cunningly he got his legs astride, gripped the body of the canoe between his knees, and then slowly leant over to the right side, working his right arm down until he seized the

gunwale. His weight bore the craft over until, when it was half-way, he suddenly released his hold, giving a vigorous downward push as he slipped into the water to push upward when the canoe turned, and righted itself with a splash.

Exactly how it was done Dan Medlicott did not fully understand, further than that it was achieved by a nice distribution of balance and pressure.

Although more than half-full of water, the canoe floated on an even keel. Silk had it drawn alongside and gave his two prisoners the task of emptying it with baling cans.

"This will be a feather in your cap, Sergeant," whispered Percy Rapson. "I expect you'll get a promotion."

Sergeant Silk made no response, but only took out his pipe and tobacco pouch and glanced eastward to where the moon was struggling to pierce the mist above the mountains. Then he looked round at Constable Medlicott.

"How are you feeling, Bob?" he inquired. "Does that bandage hurt you?"

"Some," Bob answered. "But I guess it's stopped the bleeding. You going on to Bankhead?"

"Why, cert'nly; right now. We've got to send off that message and get a squad of the boys along before Josh Casterley clears away."

By the time that he had finished his pipe, the canoe was empty of water. Its paddles were lost with all other loose gear, but he had determined to take it in tow with his two captives as passengers.

"Guess we may as well make sure of you," he said to Soaring Eagle when they were ready to start, and he produced a pair of handcuffs and clasped them about the Indian's wrists. He had not a second pair, but a spare length of rope served to secure Nosey Foster.

The further passage down the moonlit lake was accomplished without adventure, and they arrived at the police depot at Bankhead shortly after midnight.

The station was in charge of Corporal Merryweather and a constable, and while these two were conducting the prisoners to the guard-room, and Percy and Dan were helping Bob out of the canoe, Silk went to the telegraph instrument to send messages to Banff and Calgary, giving information concerning the murder of Medicine Pipe-Stem and the arrest of two of the escaped convicts, and to ask for reinforcements, with extra mounts.

He was turning away from the instrument when Dan and

Percy came into the room, having put Bob to lie down in the corporal's bunk.

"Something seems to have vexed you, Sergeant," remarked Dan.

Silk looked at his watch.

"Yes," he answered gloomily. "My plans are a little bit upset and—well, I've been kind of reprimanded by the Inspector at Calgary. He won't believe that anything has happened to Medicine Pipe-Stem. Says I've no right to take the word of a couple of irresponsible tourists. I ought to have gone and seen for myself, and I've got to go right away now and verify your evidence, and have the information all cut and dried by the time he comes here with his troop."

"Why, it'll take you hours and hours to get to that wigwam," declared Percy. "It's too far to ride. You're bound to go by water. But Dan and I will go with you, if you like, to help you with the canoe."

"I am not going by canoe," said Silk. "There's a steam launch here in the boat-house. And one of you will be enough. Dan and Constable Blake will come with me, and we shall pick up Antoine and Rippling Water on the way. You can stay behind here and look after Bob, and get a snooze, and perhaps take your trick at mounting guard over the prisoners. Yes, I know it looks rather odd to leave two such despicable ruffians in charge of so small a company, but I've got to obey my instructions, and I can't manage the launch alone."

CHAPTER XIX

PERCY'S TEMPTATION

THE Honourable Percy was proud of the responsibility thus imposed upon him, and he resolved to do his best to show Sergeant Silk that he was worthy to be trusted. Silk had told him that he might have a snooze, but he was not very tired, and he did not intend to sleep.

For the first half-hour after the launch had steamed down the creek towards the lake, he was engaged with Bob Medlicott. Then when Bob was comfortably asleep, he went down to the canoe to bring in the rifles and revolvers, and the cushions, and other things which might suffer if it came on to rain ; and when there was nothing else to be done, he sat by the fire and lighted a cigarette.

While he sat watching the resinous flames of the burning pine wood, and thinking over the events of the past day, he was startled by the clicking of the telegraph instrument in the corner of the guard-room.

He flung his unfinished cigarette into the fire and jumped to his feet. He could not himself work the telegraph, and he did not wish to disturb Bob Medlicott, so, snatching up his cap and one of the loaded revolvers, he went out to summon Corporal Merryweather, who was on guard over the two prisoners.

The temporary prison was a stable across the yard, and he ran across to it and rushed in at the open door.

"I say, Corporal," he cried, "that telegraph's buzzing and clicking away like old boots, and I can't understand it. You'd better go and see what's up."

"Yes, I heard it," nodded Corporal Merryweather. "But I couldn't leave my post. If you'll mount guard here, I'll go now." He glanced at Percy's revolver and touched it. "Put that out of sight," he said. "Lock the door on yourself when I've gone out. Don't be alarmed if I'm not back for some time."

Turning the key as soon as Merryweather had gone, Percy

found himself in a long, timber-built shed that was dimly lighted by two oil lamps, one just within the doorway on the top of a corn-bin, and the other suspended from a rafter at the farther end. He heard the rasping of a horse's halter, and saw a horse's eye gazing at him from above one of the partitions. A cow's tail swished as he went past to take up the lantern from the corn-bin, and a cat rubbed against his leg and mewed.

Carrying the lantern by its ring, he went in search of the prisoners. He gave the horse a friendly pat on its glossy hind quarters, where its troop number was branded. There were three horses, he noticed.

Beyond them were two loose boxes. He paused at the first of them and raised his lantern to look in through the bars. In the far corner lay Soaring Eagle, almost hidden under a blanket, but wide awake.

"How!" cried the Indian, rising to his feet and striding forward expectantly.

"Oh, I've not come to release you," Percy told him.

"Soaring Eagle would have done as much for his friend," returned the Redskin, with a look of appeal. "He does not forget a kindness."

Percy shook his head and drew back a step as the Indian flung out his manacled hands.

"Soaring Eagle and the Paleface are brothers," continued the prisoner, speaking in an earnest whisper. "They have smoked the calumet together. There is no enmity between them. It is not a great thing that Soaring Eagle asks—to turn a key, to open a door."

Percy Rapson stood back yet farther, swinging his lantern to and fro as he contemplated the Indian's gaunt, dark face beyond the bars, with its high cheekbones and narrow, beady eyes, and its frame of wet black hair, that fell in long, lank wisps about his shoulders; and he wondered how ever he could have trusted a man with such an evil-looking face.

"Wough!" grunted Soaring Eagle in disgust. "The Paleface has a heart of stone. It is cold and bloodless. He forgets his friends who have smoked the pipe with him. He is not sorry. He would see his brother die and not put out a hand to save him. He is no good. He is a woman."

Then from behind the bars beyond him Nosey Foster added his pleading.

"Say, Percy," he whined, "you an' me was pardners once, wasn't we? Many's the hand of poker we've had together in

Casterley's store at Hilton's Jump. Say, you ain't goin' ter round on a chap now, are you ? Let's git out of this shanty, won't you ? You ain't one of the Mounted Police. You don't owe them any duty, 'specially Sergeant Silk. Why, it was him ez collared you that time when you was in the middle of a game of poker along of me. It was him ez got you shoved inter chokey. Don't yer want ter git even with him ? Now's your chance; take it, and pay him out for what he done."

Percy turned away without a word, and the two prisoners watched him like a pair of caged animals as he strode slowly from them towards the door.

Presently he heard one of them flinging himself against the bars of his cell, and he went back. He knew that the horse-boxes had not been built for the imprisonment of such desperate criminals, and that they might easily escape if they were not constantly watched. He began to wish that Corporal Merryweather would come back and relieve him.

When he returned he found Nosey Foster trying to wriggle out of the rope that bound his hands behind him.

"Stop that!" he commanded.

"This yer rope's cuttin' inter my flesh," Nosey complained. "Say, it's sure agin the regulations ter fasten a man up like this."

"The rope won't hurt you if you stay quiet." Percy advised him.

"Look here, Percy, old pard," said Nosey in a coaxing voice, as he beckoned his head invitingly. "I got suthin' ter say ter you."

Percy humoured him by going nearer.

"Say, you never knowed me ter go back on a pal," pursued Nosey. "And you and me was allus pals. We allus split fair, whatever it was. Share and share alike, eh ? That's how it was. Well, look here. I've got a sound bargain ter propose. Say, it's just between you an' me. Soarin' Eagle don't stand in with us, see ? Listen ! You help me ter quit, right now, an' I'll give you a tip as'll be wuth thousands t' you."

"I don't want any of your tips, Nosey," said Percy, turning on his heel and walking to and fro along the passage.

"Say, you don't savee," Nosey resumed. "'Tain't none of your horse-racin' tips. It's a tip 'bout Rattlesnake Ranch, an' suthin' ez you kin make your pile over. Nobody knows 'cept me an' Josh Casterley, an' Josh ain't liable ter cut in before you. Say, are you goin' ter open this gate an' untie this rope ? It'll be sure wuth your while."

Percy was rather curious to know just what it was that Nosey had found out about Rattlesnake Ranch. Had he discovered a vein of gold ? He felt sure that Nosey was making a genuine offer of what might be a valuable secret as the price of his liberty. But while he was wondering what that secret could be, Percy remembered Sergeant Silk's proud refusal of a bribe in similar circumstances, and he looked across at Nosey Foster and said :

" No, I am not going to open the gate. And you may keep your tips to yourself."

As he turned once more he glanced in at Soaring Eagle. Something in the Indian's attitude caused him to look at him more intently. He was standing close against the back of the horse-box with an ear pressed against a joint in the outer timbers, and he seemed to be listening.

Percy carried his lantern to the corn-bin, and, leaving it there, crept back again very silently. He was wearing canvas boating shoes with india-rubber soles, and they made no sound as he retraced his footsteps. But when he got back he could see nothing of Soaring Eagle in the darkness.

He stood very still, conscious that it was rather mean of him to come sneaking like a spy upon prisoners who could not possibly escape. As he was turning on his heel, however, he became aware that after all there was something suspicious going on.

He heard a strange sound. It was as if a brood of chickens were moving about at the other side of the timbers, against which Soaring Eagle had been listening. Their " cheep, cheep, cheep," was quite distinct. And yet it was not usual for chickens to be out at two o'clock in the morning. Furthermore, there was something curiously insistent in the sound.

While he stood irresolute, Soaring Eagle repeated the sound from his side of the timbers, and Percy Rapson instantly realised that it was the Indian's answer to a signal from outside.

Feeling a little nervous, he went silently back to the corn-bin. He waited beside it for many minutes with his gaze turned along the passage towards the faint light of the hanging lantern. His heart gave a jump as a knock came upon the door behind him. He was trembling from head to foot, but he controlled his nervousness enough to call out :

" Who goes ? "

" All right, Rapson," answered Corporal Merryweather. And when Percy drew open the door, he added : " We've no password here, but you're quite right to challenge even me. Sorry

I've been so long, but Inspector McGinnis has kept me at the instrument, rowing me for all he's worth, because Sergeant Silk has gone off up the lake and left me alone in charge."

"Sergeant Silk was only obeying his orders," said Percy.

"Yes, I know," returned Merryweather, "the orders of Inspector Curtis, who is no friend of Inspector McGinnis."

Percy drew the corporal within the doorway.

"Listen," he whispered. "I've something to tell you. I believe there's an Indian scout prowling around, back of the stables here. Soaring Eagle has been tracked, and his friends mean to have a try to rescue him."

"That so?" queried Corporal Merryweather "How d'you make that out? You've not been outside, have you? Did you see anything?"

"No. I only heard a kind of chirping, and Soaring Eagle answered it."

"Say, I'm beginning to wish that Sergeant Silk hadn't obeyed his orders for once," reflected the corporal. "You wait here and keep your eyes skinned, while I go and have a look round. And if you see anything in the shape of an Indian, shoot. And mind you take sure aim."

Percy watched his companion cross the yard to the guard-room, where he disappeared, to come out again with a rifle under his arm, and stride quickly and quietly round each of the huts and outhouses of the station.

When Merryweather returned, he said in a cautious undertone:

"You're quite right about that scout. He's nowhere around here now, but he has left the marks of his moccasins in the mud, back of the stables. Guess he's gone off to give in his report to the braves that are waiting for him somewhere up the gulch. They won't be here for a while. You'd better go in to the guard-room fire and have a sleep."

"Not I," objected Percy. "I'm miles too excited to sleep. If Bob Medlicott's safe, I'd rather stop here."

"Then go in and fetch a rifle and cartridges," the constable ordered. "You may need them. And fasten the door when you come out."

When Percy returned with his own rifle and bandolier, he found that in his absence the constable had saddled two of the horses.

"Do you expect we shall want them?" he inquired wonderingly.

"There's no knowing," said the corporal; "but it's always well to be prepared for possible emergencies. We might have to chase someone, see?"

He drew back the shutter of a loophole at either side of the closed door, and the faint moonlight came in.

"If that scout you heard was spying around with the idea of rescuing the prisoners," he said, "we needn't be anxious about the posthouse, or anything else than this stable, and no one could break in through the roof or the walls."

He took up the lantern and strode to the end of the passage and back.

"They're both as quiet as lambs," he whispered, and perching himself on the lid of the corn-bin he lighted his pipe, and, folding his arms, leant back against the wall and invited Percy to tell him of the discovery of Medicine Pipe-Stem and the capture of the two escaped convicts.

They talked together for a long time, sitting side by side; but presently, in spite of his desire to keep awake, Percy's eyes became heavy, and he began to dose, and at last his head fell against Corporal Merryweather's shoulder.

How long he slept he did not know; but he was suddenly aroused by the sharp grip of a hand on his knee.

"Listen!" whispered the corporal.

He slipped off the bin very quietly and stood there, still with his hand on Percy's knee.

"Thought I heard the sound of hoofs," he added. "Can't be the boys, yet. Wait here while I go around and see if anyone's in sight."

He took his rifle in the crook of his arm and went out very silently.

Percy had heard nothing, and as he listened now all was quiet. The cow in her stall was audibly chewing the cud, one of the horses was restless, the mosquitoes were buzzing. Once Nosey Foster kicked a foot against the partition, and Soaring Eagle heaved a deep sigh, but there was no other sound.

He turned and looked out through one of the loopholes. He could see the lighted window of the guard-room, and the smoke from the chimney curling grey against the dense blackness of the mountains beyond.

All was very still and peaceful, and Percy began to imagine what this lonely outpost must be like in the winter, when the lake and river were frozen, and the hills and valleys lay deep under the snow.

Suddenly he was startled by the sharp crack of a rifle-shot. The horses flung up their heads in alarm.

"Wough!" muttered Soaring Eagle.

"Hullo!" exclaimed Nosey Foster. "Some chap havin' a shot at a coyote, I guess!"

There was only that one shot, and its echoes were sent back like an answering volley from the mountains. Percy listened for another. All his nerves were tingling, He seized his gun. As he did so hurried footsteps sounded outside, and presently the door was pushed open and Corporal Merryweather strode within, shutting it behind him, and turning the key.

"I see you've got your gun ready," he said, as he calmly extinguished the light of the lantern. "Take the left loophole and fire as they come up. Keep cool. They won't be here for a while yet; but they're sure coming—a whole crowd of them."

"Whom did you shoot at?" Percy asked.

"Just an Indian," returned Merryweather, extracting a spent cartridge from his gun. "The skunk was building a stack of timber against the place where you heard the chickens cheeping, and I let him know that he was seen. That's all. Say, they're coming, now. Take good aim."

From afar, Percy could now hear the beating of galloping hoofs. The Indians, knowing that they had been discovered, but that the station was ill-defended, had determined to make a sudden assault upon the stables. They came swiftly nearer and nearer, making the ground tremble as they raced forward.

As the foremost rider came in sight the corporal opened fire with his repeating rifle, and the first shot was answered by a wild yell of defiance. Percy fired also, but already the Redskins, surprised at the unexpected reception, wheeled abruptly round and vanished.

"Josh Casterley's with them," declared Percy. "I saw his white face in the moonlight. It was at him that I aimed my second shot. But I'm afraid I missed him."

"That's a pity," said Merryweather, with his face at the loophole. "Hullo!" he cried, as a shot rang out across the yard. "Bob Medlicott's awake, it seems!"

Another and another shot was fired from the open window of the guard-room, and, looking out, Percy could see Bob Medlicott's gun spurting its jets of fire and smoke from the level of the window-sill. Bob was picking off the Indians who had dismounted and were crawling under the shelter of the wall towards the stable-door.

"Slip along and have a look at the prisoners," ordered the corporal. "Here's matches. Light the lantern. Keep your eye on them."

Percy quickly obeyed. Running along past the horses, he stopped and flashed the light upon Soaring Eagle. There was a creaking of timber, and the Indian was pressing with his back against a crowbar, which had been forced in between the heavy planks from the outside.

Soaring Eagle looked round guiltly as the light fell upon him. He pushed the crowbar backward and moved aside as it was withdrawn, revealing a dark hole, at which Percy promptly fired a revolver shot.

Nosey Foster, meanwhile, was peering through the bars of his cage, apparently wondering what was happening.

"Now's your chance, Percy," he appealed. "Open this yer gate an' untie my ropes. Come along—quick!"

"Stand back!" commanded Percy, taking up a position between the two cells, whence he could keep close watch upon the prisoners.

From the door came the sounds of clubs and tomahawks battering upon it to force an entrance, while Corporal Merryweather's revolver was at work firing through the loophole whenever an Indian came out from the shelter of the protecting wall. At the same time, Bob Medlicott was keeping up a steady fire from his ambush of the now darkened guard-room.

Presently the crowbar was again thrust between the timbers behind Soaring Eagle, and there was an ominous creaking and splintering of wood. Here certainly was the danger-point of the attack. If one of those heavy baulks of timber should be dislodged, it would be easy enough for the Redskins outside to widen the breach and drag Soaring Eagle out to his coveted liberty.

Percy made his way into the adjoining loose box, and searched busily for some crack or gap through which he might thrust the muzzle of his revolver. At length he found a knot-hole, high up beyond his reach. But he soon dragged in an empty packing-case, and, standing upon it, he fired six shots in quick succession.

The yells and groans which followed told him of the crowd of Indians who had been trying to break in at this point. But very soon there was silence, and the crowbar remained where they had abandoned it.

"Heap bad! Heap bad!" cried Soaring Eagle in despair at the failure of his friends to rescue him.

Percy now turned to go back to the door, but as he did so he was met by a cloud of smoke. He stood still, trying to discover where it came from. A tongue of flame at the far end of the stable indicated its source, and he saw that a bundle of hay was on fire.

The Indians had divided their forces into several parties, and some of them had sought to force an entrance at the unprotected west-end of the building where no bullets could reach them. They had burrowed a hole under the foundation of the wall of timber, and thrusting in a lighted torch had succeeded in setting alight the store of hay. Very soon the timbers themselves must catch fire, and the whole stable would be in flames. There were the horses, and the cow, as well as the two manacled prisoners to be considered, while Constable Merryweather and Percy himself were in danger.

There was but one possible exit—the door. And the door was now surrounded by a crowd of yelling savages, who stood about with their clubs and knives and tomahawks, ready to fall upon anyone who should attempt to escape.

What was to be done ?

Percy Rapson stood irresolute as he watched the tiny tongues of flame flickering amid the smoke that rose in gusts from the smouldering bundle of loose hay. Then he strode quickly forward, and, plunging into the fire, began to stamp it out, while he tried to drag the bundle away. But in doing this he only loosened the dry grass and exposed it to the draught which came in by the gap that the Indians had made, whereby to thrust in their burning faggots, and a shower of biting sparks was wafted up into his face. He could see that his task of arresting the threatening flames was already hopeless unless he could at once bring water.

He was a stranger in this stable. and did not know where water could be got ; nor could he expect help from Corporal Merryweather, who was now engaged in defending the doorway.

But where there were horses, water was sure to be near.

Even in his excitement he remembered to have seen a pail near the cow's stall, and he turned and ran for it, past the two prisoners, who were now clamouring to escape ; past the horses, that were snorting and pulling at their halters.

" Fire ! " he shouted as he ran.

But Corporal Merryweather had become aware of the smoke, and was already coming towards him carrying a full pail.

" Here, take this while I fetch another," cried the constable, passing it to him.

As Percy hurried back, he realised that the Indians were hammering more vigorously than ever at the door in their efforts to force an entrance. But in the midst of the noise of battering club and tomahawk, there came at intervals the crack of a rifle from across the yard outside.

Bob Medlicott was at work. At the first he had opened fire from the guard-room, turning out the lamp. But two of the Redskins were armed with repeating rifles and seemed to have a good supply of ammunition, while many had bows, and very soon his well-directed fire was returned by showers of arrows and bullets, and he was obliged to take up a less exposed position.

Barring and locking the door, and closing the shutters of the window, he had taken two service rifles and a box of cartridges up the ladder into the loft above. This had been a most difficult undertaking for a man with one arm in a sling and a painful wound in his side; but Bob was worthy of the Force to which he belonged, and pain and difficulty were not to be considered when there was duty to be done.

Lying along the floor in front of a narrow ventilation aperture that served as a loophole, he commanded the whole of the south wall of the stables across the moonlit yard, and could watch every movement of the Indians, as they attempted to break in through the door.

Corporal Merryweather's bullets were having very little effect. His loophole was flush with the wall, and he could not direct his fire upon the wary savages, who crept past beneath it. But Bob could pick them off as he chose, and, in spite of his helpless arm and the sickening pain of his wounds, he kept up a steady fire.

From the east end of the stable building a party of braves tried to silence him. Their bullets whistled over his head, and the timber frame of his loophole soon bristled with arrows.

One of the Redskins seemed to be a particularly skilful marksman with the rifle—an unusual accomplishment for an Indian. But Bob turned his aim upon him, succeeding at length in crippling him.

Then, shortly after he had heard Percy Rapson's six revolver shots fired within the stable, he observed a waft of smoke rising from the farther end of the building, and heard a crowd of Redskins yelling joyfully as the smoke grew more dense. He moved round to send a couple of bullets into their midst as they ran out.

But now the firing from the loophole by the door had abruptly

ceased, and the Indians, rallying around at this vulnerable point, had seized the broken shaft of a cart with which to make an assault upon the door.

Whatever else should happen, Bob Medlicott knew that his one all-important duty was to prevent the savages from making an entrance and liberating the two prisoners, and now, whilst inside the stables Merryweather and Percy Rapson were engaged in throwing water on the rising flames, he concentrated his aim upon the Redskins at the doorway.

He lost some valuable moments while loading up his two rifles, but as the savages were drawing back, preparing to deal a third blow, he was ready, and he took careful aim, firing three shots in quick succession, with the result that two of the braves fell with their battering-ram on the top of them.

Their second blow had split a long crack in the stout middle plank of the door; but the lock and the heavy cross-bar had held.

Within the stable, Percy Rapson had thrown three pails of water upon the burning hay, and Corporal Merryweather had left the water-tap running so that the stream from it was already coursing along the channel in front of the stalls, and making its way towards the farther end to complete the work of stifling the fire.

Percy had regarded Sergeant Silk as the coolest-headed and most resourceful man in existence; but Corporal Merryweather almost rivalled him in possession of these qualities. And when the assault of the battering-ram sounded for a second time, and he heard the ominous splitting of timber, he put down the empty water-pail, and, turning to Percy, said very calmly:

"Keep your eye on the prisoners. If they attempt to get out, shoot them down. Don't be afraid. And look out for yourself if that doors falls."

He ran back to the corn-bin, and, taking up a couple of revolvers, stood ready, waiting with one in each hand, far enough off to take sure aim at the savages when they rushed in.

He listened for the third blow, expecting that it would be final, for he could see a line of moonlight through the crack that had been made. But it did not come. The attack on the door had suddenly ceased. He heard groans and cries of pain from the wounded savages; he heard the ceaseless cracking of Bob Medlicott's gun and the spatter of a bullet or two against the timbers. Then, after a moment of silence, there arose a wild, piercing yell of alarm, and, leaping to the loophole, he looked out to see the Indians scattering in a mad stampede.

Had they abandoned their attempt when success seemed so near, so certain ?

There was quiet for the space of a minute or more—quiet but for the moans of the wounded, deserted by their friends, who were hastening towards the shelter of the river-bank, where they had left their ponies.

But presently from along the gulch, at the rear of the station, he heard the welcome and familiar sound of swiftly galloping troop horses and the sudden shrill blast of a bugle.

Corporal Merryweather did not yet consider it safe to open the door. Instead of doing so he strode back to where Percy Rapson still stood at his post on guard over Soaring Eagle and Nosey Foster, with his feet in a pool of water.

"Say, I don't just know what I should have done without you, Rapson," he said. "You've got some grit. You've done well. What about that hay ? Is the fire sure out ? "

"Yes," Percy answered. "That water from the tap has been as good as a fire-engine. What's all the row outside ? It sounds like a troop of cavalry."

"I guess it's the boys from Banff," said Merryweather, looking in at the prisoners and assuring himself finally that there was now no possibility of their escape. "Say, we'll just go and see," he added, beckoning to Percy.

He took one of the saddled horses from its stall, and Percy opened the door to let him lead the broncho out into the yard, past the half-dozen savages, who lay dead or wounded beyond the threshold.

The key was transferred to the outside, and the door locked. Then, mounting his charger, Corporal Merryweather rode off to meet Inspector McGinnis, while Percy, with the stable key in his possession, ran across to the guard-room, where Bob Medlicott stood leaning against the post of the open door looking alarmingly ill.

"You'd better get back to your bunk, hadn't you ? " Percy recommended. "You've been doing too much. You're pretty well knocked up. Come, let me help you."

Bob's face, begrimed with powder smoke, dust, and perspiration, showed that he was in pain ; but he was still resolute.

"I'm not going to let our chaps think I can't stand a bit of knocking about," he said proudly. "I shall turn in when I've reported myself to the officer in charge of the troop that's just come along, but not before."

Percy had seen Inspector McGinnis ride up to Corporal Merryweather and accompany him to the rear of the stables.

"Do you mind letting me have a jaw with him first?" he asked. "I want to tell him how splendidly you've saved the situation. I'm jolly well sure you'll make out that you've done next to nothing. That's the way with all of you Mounted Police. You're too modest for words, every one of you. You're like a lot of schoolgirls. And you can't report yourself yet. Inspector McGinnis isn't coming here. He's just gone off to try to round up the Redskins."

He persuaded Bob to lie down, gave him a drink of water, and covered him with a blanket to protect him from the cold morning air. Then he put a few billets of wood into the stove, and seated himself in a cane chair to smoke a cigarette. Two of the newly-arrived troopers had been stationed on sentry duty at the stables; others had dismounted to attend to the wounded Indians and there was nothing further to be done.

Percy was very tired after his unaccustomed work and excitement, and, leaning back in his chair, he finished his cigarette and allowed himself to fall asleep.

When he awoke, startled by the shrill notes of a bugle, it was broad daylight. The yard was thronged with men dressed in suits of brown canvas or fringed deerskin, or red jackets and blue trousers, with silk handkerchiefs knotted round their sunburnt necks, long boots, sombrero hats, brown leather belts glittering with a line of brass cartridges, and a big revolver at the right-hand side.

Percy knew many of them by sight. They all belonged to Troop E. Hard-featured, weather-beaten, dusty, great big men they were, all with the same clear, far-seeing eyes, the same pride of bearing and swaggering gallantry.

Some of them were rolling their blankets, some washing, some grooming their horses or removing bedding from under the wagons where they had slept.

In the middle of the yard an iron bar had been set on a pair of uprights, from which hung three kettles over a roaring fire. At a second bugle call there was a general dash to the wagons for plates and cups, while knives were whipped from belt or bootleg ready for an assault on fried bacon, hard biscuit, and scalding tea.

On attempting to sit up, Percy discovered that there was one of his silk cushions behind his head, and that his legs had been swathed in a blanket and lifted to the support of an empty

Percy disentangled himself from the blanket and stood up.

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packing-case. It was no wonder that he had slept comfortably. He disentangled himself from the blanket and stood up.

"Ah, *bonjour*, Monsieur Percee!" exclaimed a familiar voice behind him. "It seem you 'ave 'ad ver' exciting tam, hein?"

"Hullo, Antoine," cried Percy. "You back from Ghost Pine Creek? Yes, we've had a lively time. Where's Sergeant Silk? And Dan and Rip—they've come back with you, of course?"

"But, yes," Antoine answered, following him out into the yard.

Beyond the door he came upon Sergeant Silk sitting astride of a bench with his arms and neck bared and his bronzed face lathered with soap, shaving himself without the aid of a looking-glass.

Percy stood behind him waiting while the sergeant's razor was at work; but Silk seemed to know by some intuition that he was there.

"You appear to have had a busy night, Percy," he said, wiping the soapy razor blade on his finger. "I congratulate you on coming out of a tight corner so successfully. Corporal Merryweather tells me you were quite the hero of the occasion."

"Indeed, I was nothing of the sort," protested Percy. "He did heaps more than I did. He ran the whole show. I only did what he told me to do. No; if you come to heroism, Bob Medlicott deserves most of the credit. The way he kept those savages from breaking in the door, firing on them from the loft, was simply ripping. The prisoners would have been liberated, the horses would have been stolen, and Corporal Merryweather and I would certainly have been killed, if it hadn't been for Bob."

Sergeant Silk was applying the razor to his chin as he said:

"So? And in spite of his wounded arm? Say, I just wish you'd say all that to Inspector McGinnis, will you? It might be a good thing for Bob."

"I shall say that, and more," returned Percy. "I used to consider Bob a sort of milksop, because he doesn't smoke; but I've altered my mind about him lately."

"Exactly," said Silk, drawing a finger along his chin. "You know him better; that is all."

Percy lingered near him while he continued to groom himself and presently Dan Medlicott, coming up from the creek where he had been for a morning swim, observed him, and strode across the barrack-yard to congratulate him on having been under fire, and to express his regret at having missed the excitement.

"You were heaps better off where you were—in that steam

launch," Percy assured him, "and I'm ready to bet that you had some adventure or other, seeing that Sergeant Silk was with you."

Dan shook his head and smiled.

"Then you'd lose your bet," he said, "for we hadn't even the excitement of runnin' into a snag."

"Did you make any fresh discoveries at Ghost Pine Creek?" Percy inquired.

"No," Dan answered.

"No," added Sergeant Silk, "for you see Antoine and Rippling Water had been there already, and they hadn't left anything to be found out."

"Then you made sure that the thing was done by Soaring Eagle?" pursued Percy.

"Why, cert'nly," nodded Silk. "Antoine knew that as soon as he saw the knife."

"Yes," rejoined Dan. "You see, it was the same knife that Soaring Eagle had when he crawled up to attack the sergeant that time in Casterley's store."

"That reminds me, Percy," said Silk. "I'm told that you saw Josh Casterley here along with the Redskins. Are you sure it was he?"

"Quite," returned Percy. "Hasn't he been caught?"

"No," Silk told him; "and the boys haven't even dropped on his trail. I shouldn't wonder any at his having made a bee-line for Rattlesnake Ranch."

"Why should he go there?" Dan questioned sharply.

Sergeant Silk did not answer, but Percy, remembering something Nosey Foster had half told him in the stable, said to himself:

"I think I can guess."

Over their breakfast Dan and Percy discussed their immediate plans. There was no longer any particular reason for their remaining in the neighbourhood of Lake Minnewanka, and, as Dan was wanted at home to help in the harvesting and Percy was not over-eager to prolong his canoeing trip, they decided to return to the ranch, borrowing horses and riding part of the way in company with the detachment of the Mounted Police who were to take Soaring Eagle and Nosey Foster back to prison with the wounded Indians.

Accordingly after breakfast horses were saddled and the riders moved off from Bankhead, kicking up a cloud of dust as they entered the gulch to breast the hillside, with the groaning transport wagons following behind, well guarded.

CHAPTER XX

MAPLE LEAF'S STRANGER

"TIRED, Percy?"

"Tired isn't the word to describe how I feel," Percy answered, looking across the tea-table at Bob Medlicott, who had asked him the superfluous question. "It's been about the hardest day's work I've ever put in. I'm glad it isn't harvest time all the year round, although," he added lightly, glancing to the head of the table, "I suppose your mother wouldn't mind if it were. She'd soon be as wealthy as a Nabob at that rate."

"Why, is the crop so good, Percy?" smiled his hostess, who was presiding over the family teapot.

"It's heaps heavier than we expected," Percy declared, with the assurance of one who might be appealed to as an authority on farm produce. "In fact, it's a marvel. You see, it will grade at least sixty-four pounds to the bushel, and it runs to quite forty bushels to the acre. I dare say it would have panned out better still if you hadn't made the mistake of drilling in so much of the seed on the stubble. What you need is a good steam plough, and you ought to break up the whole of that eighty-acre patch of prairie land for wheat."

Mrs. Medlicott nodded in appreciation of Percy's recommendation.

"Perhaps I shall take your advice next season, if I can afford the plough and so much seed corn," she responded.

Percy's deeply sunburnt face grew more ruddy as he caught Dan Medlicott's eye upon him.

"I'm afraid the advice isn't altogether original," he confessed. "I don't know anything about it myself yet, though I'm learning. I'm afraid I was only repeating what Sergeant Silk was saying this afternoon to Dave Morrison."

"Sergeant Silk?" echoed Joan Medlicott from the end of the table, where she had been serving the cold ham and meat. "I didn't know he was in the neighbourhood! Why didn't he give us a call, I wonder?"

Her sister Betty looked up guiltily from over her teacup.

"He was goin' to," she said mischievously. "I met him ridin' through the orchard and had a long talk with him, and told him you was busy with the washin', and he didn't seem to hanker after comin' then."

"Guess he was on his way to Hilton's Jump," put in Bob. "There's something going a bit wrong over there again among the half-breeds. They're getting restless. But I expect he'll drop in here to-night."

"He's comin' along to supper," Dan announced.

Joan presently rose from the table, and moved about the room with the purpose of making it tidy for the expected visit of the sergeant, whose observant eyes were alert to detect a speck of dust. She took Percy Rapson's hat from the sofa and hung it on a prong of a moose antlers which served as a hat rack. She arranged the guns more neatly in their stand, straightened the rugs on the floor, the pictures on the walls, and rearranged the plates and bright brass candlesticks on the dresser.

While she was thus busily engaged, she came to a corner of the shelf which Betty had appropriated as a receptacle for her personal treasures.

"Say, you, Betty," Joan complained, "I do wish you wouldn't bring all this useless rubbish into the house! This isn't a curiosity museum. What d'you want with all these dead birds and butterflies, and all these stones? They make the place so untidy." She advanced to the table. "Look here, mother," she said, holding forth an apron full of miscellaneous stones, "isn't it just too bad of her?"

"Really, Betty," their mother agreed, "you oughtn't to load the house up with so much useless lumber!"

Percy Rapson, who was at her side, also looked down into Joan's apron.

"That's a curious bit of stone, though—that black one," he remarked, touching one with the point of a finger. He picked it out and examined it. "Where did you find it, Betty?" he inquired.

"Oh, there's lots of that about the ranch," Betty replied.

"Looks almost like coal," said Percy.

"'Tisn't coal, though," said Betty. "It won't burn."

"Are you sure?" questioned Percy. "Have you tried?"

He stood up and Betty made no protest when he took the black stone to the stove and thrust it among the burning pine logs. He watched it. For a long time it refused to ignite, and no smoke

came from it. He looked at his fingers and saw that they were still clean. Dan and Betty went to his side and watched also.

"You see," declared Betty, "it doesn't burn."

"There's a corner of it gettin' red," said Dan.

"Yes," nodded Percy. "It's getting red-hot. It isn't ordinary coal; but it's coal, for all that. It's what they call anthracite. I wonder——"

He broke off abruptly, thinking once again of the secret which Nosey Foster had been on the point of telling him in the stable at Bankhead. "It's a tip about Rattlesnake Ranch," Nosey had said in offering his secret as the price of his liberty. "Suthin' ez you kin make your pile over; a tip ez'll be worth thousands to you."

"What is it that you wonder?" Dan asked him.

Percy shrugged his shoulders.

"Oh, nothing much," he answered lightly.

And he turned away, leaving the piece of coal to burn itself out while he went into the scullery on his way to the kennel to have a look at his bull pups.

In the backyard he came upon Maple Leaf.

"Hullo, Maple!" he cried with less than the pleasure which he had been accustomed to display towards the dark-eyed Indian girl. "You're looking a bit scared. Anything up?"

Maple Leaf stood in silence for some moments. She was not looking at Percy. Her gaze was directed across the clearing to the belt of pine-trees at the back of the ranch-house.

"What are you looking at?" asked Percy. "Why are you so agitated?"

She turned upon him quickly, eagerly, and caught at his sleeve.

"Listen!" she panted. "You say—I hear you say Sergeant Silk he gone along to Hilton's Jump. That is so?"

"Sure," nodded Percy. "What about that? He is gone there on duty."

"I think his duty is here, on Rattlesnake Ranch," rejoined Maple Leaf mysteriously.

She gazed searchingly among the pine-trees and presently pointed a brown finger to a gap in the timber to where the swell of golden grass rolled away to violet distances.

"What is it?" questioned Percy.

"Far away there," answered Maple Leaf, "this afternoon, while you all were busy at the harvesting, I see a stranger wandering. This evening—just now before you and Dan came in from the wheatfield—I see him once again, not so much a

stranger. He was searching—what you call prospecting—I think."

"Oh?" said Percy, becoming interested. "Prospecting for gold?"

Maple Leaf looked at him very calmly for a moment.

"There is no gold but among the mountain creeks," she responded. "But he search and search none the less."

"H'm!" muttered Percy. "Who was it, do you know?"

Again she was silent: but he knew her ways, he knew that she would tell him in her own time.

"Yes," she replied presently. "He was far away, but my eyes are not blind. I knew him. It was Josh Casterley."

"Sure?"

"Sure," she answered. "I think Sergeant Silk he would be very glad to catch him."

"He would just," Percy assured her. "Thank you for telling me, Maple Leaf. Sergeant Silk will be here to-night. I will tell him as soon as he comes."

"It is better that you ride and tell him now," Maple Leaf urged, as he turned away to the kennels.

But Percy did not heed her recommendation.

Later in the evening Dan Medlicott went out to the stables. He passed Maple Leaf as she was coming in from the hen house, and saw her looking eastward.

"I think someone make a camp fire over there," she remarked, sniffing the air.

In the stable he found her father The Moose That Walks, and her brother, Rippling Water. They were busy attending to the horses for the night. Rip went out to the pump for a pail of water. At the door he stood and sniffed, just as Maple Leaf had done. He called his father to his side.

The Moose That Walks stood bareheaded, smelling at the air for some moments.

"Wough!" he said at length, and with a glance at Dan, he added: "It is not safe to make fire so near the trees."

"I don't know who'd ever think of making one," cried Dan in alarm, starting off.

Rip followed him through the cabbage patch and across the clearing, but before they got to the trees Rippling Water had broken into a run, and Dan was aware that a thick mist of blue smoke was drifting towards them through the timber. They ran together through the scrub, and as they ran the smoke grew thicker.

"It's comin' up from the coulee beyond the trees!" cried Dan.

"Sure," agreed Rip, running ahead.

Dan was quickly at his heels. He was beginning to feel the smoke in his throat.

Suddenly as the two boys ran on, leaping or tearing their way through the scrub, the ominous crackling sound of burning twigs reached them, and a fierce red glare of flames and sparks shone upward upon a heavy cloud of black smoke.

"Back! Back!" cried Dan. "The timber's on fire! Run back for help!"

Rippling Water needed no second telling. He had seen what Dan had seen—that the fire had started at the corner of a field of standing oats, that it was already swiftly devouring the ripe grain as it crept backward against the wind, while on the nearer side of the hollow the wind was sweeping the flames up the slope towards the pine-trees over a bank of dry sage grass and young maples.

Dan stood still, looking down into what seemed like a yawning pit of fire. The wind was blowing directly towards the ranch-house through the pine trees; and if the flames should reach the pines, there could be no possibility of saving the house, or its outbuildings, unless by some unexpected miracle.

Even while he stood there at the top of the bluff, listening to Rip's cries of alarm as he ran back, Dan saw the flames twisting and curling round a group of maple trees and leaping upward to the crimson leaves.

Farther away, a breath of wind fanned a tuft of smouldering grass into flame, and the red tendrils shot up into the brushwood and thence to the resinous branches of a black spruce overhead, and thence again to another.

The black and white spruce trees, laden with turpentine and resin, and dried by the long summer heat, were torches ready made for spreading destruction, and the hickory and maples caught fire hardly less quickly.

Dan realised that he could do nothing to stem the advancing tide of crackling flame and blinding, choking smoke, and he turned and ran back to the house, where Rippling Water had already carried the alarm.

All the household had come out into the clearing, and the ranch hands were racing up from the bunk-house. All that could be done was to attempt to save the ranch buildings by preventing the flames from reaching them.

"Bring along a plough!" shouted Bob Medlicott.

"Water! Water!" cried Percy Rapson.

Dave Morrison and The Moose That Walks opened the door of one of the sheds, while Rip brought a pair of plough horses from the stable. A plough was dragged out from the shed, the horses were harnessed to it, and the foreman at once started driving a furrow along the clearing next to the trees, turning and ploughing backward. To and fro, he worked laboriously, while many of his men with axe and knife went in among the tree-trunks, cutting away the brushwood.

From beyond the timber there came a dull roar as the fire spread like a flood over the field of ripe oats, and, as the twilight deepened, the flames lit up the land for miles around with a flickering glow, while the smoke rose in a heavy pall into the sky.

"We've sure lost that nice crop of oats," deplored Mrs. Medlicott. "But the wheat may be safe if the fire doesn't jump the creek."

"The wind's that way," said Bob. "Reckon we'd best give an eye to the bridge presently, and keep a crossing open."

"Send Dan right now," advised his mother. "That's if you can find him."

Dan was down at the foot of the slope behind the bunk-house. He had seen that the field of oats was burning far quicker than the pine trees, and that the fire, if not checked in this direction, would be swept round to the steadings and thence inevitably make its way to the dwelling-house and the stables. And seeing this, he had called Percy and Rip and Maple Leaf, and the four of them were at work with sickles cutting a wide strip through a corner of the oat-field and starting a back-fire between the bared strip and the ditch.

Bob Medlicott had known their intention and approved of it; and now he hastened down the slope to assure himself that their back-fire was not increasing the danger which they were trying to avert.

When he joined them, they had burnt a wide stretch of the grain and were engaged in damping it out with blankets tied round the ends of staves and soaked with water from the ditch.

"That's all right," he declared with satisfaction, and he bade Dan go down to the creek to watch that the bridge did not catch fire. For this was the only way of escape if the flames should spread to the house and flight become necessary.

Already the pine trees were burning fiercely, and the roar of

the flames and falling timber as the conflagration widened followed Dan down the silent creek. Unless rain should come, or the wind should change its direction, it seemed to him that his home was doomed.

Every inhabitant of the ranch was at work, but they were very few to fight against that devouring furnace, that glowed red behind the blackness of the farm buildings and sent golden flakes of fire amid the choking fumes, drifting towards the river and the orchard and cornfields beyond.

Suddenly through the fearful roar that came to him as he stood upon the bridge, Dan heard the beating of a horse's hoofs from the orchard.

Nearer and swiftly nearer the sound came, and almost before he could move back to the bank, the galloping, panting horse was pounding across the bridge to flash by with Sergeant Silk in the saddle.

" Stop where you are, Dan ! " cried Silk, as he clattered past. And ever afterwards Dan marvelled how it was that he had been seen.

Dan had caught only a glimpse of Sergeant Silk as he dashed past at top speed on his panting, sweating troop horse ; but that glimpse put new hope into him. He had believed until now that no human effort could save the ranch from complete destruction ; but as he watched the soldier-policeman galloping up the slope through the drift of smoke and disappear round a turn in the path, his despair fell from him like a heavy load. He knew that if anyone could avert the final and most awful disaster that one was Sergeant Silk.

" Stop where you are, Dan ! " Silk had cried out as he flashed by on his steaming steed.

Dan knew by this that while the sergeant had been racing in hot haste to the relief of the threatened ranch across the marshes and the prairie pastures from Hilton's Jump, he had been calmly calculating all the dangers and all the possibilities of rescue and that among other considerations he had seen the vital importance of protecting the bridge from the advancing flames.

It seemed at first that Silk had come alone, but he had outstripped all other riders, and he had not long disappeared into the smoke when two other brown-clad troopers rattled across the bridge.

These were presently followed by a bare-headed horseman in a grey shirt with a red handkerchief round his neck.

By the light of the flames Dan saw the rider's eager face and

knew him to be Denis O'Connor, the condemned man, whose reprieve he himself had carried to the barracks at Canmore on the night when he was waylaid in mistake for Sergeant Silk. And behind Denis came Antoine and a band of cowboys, Indians, and half-breeds, all racing to give needed help.

The last of them, an Indian, had hardly passed when, looking after them, Dan saw someone hurrying towards him from the homestead. It was his sister, Betty, carrying a heavy tin box and dragging after her two of Percy Rapson's bull-pups.

Dan ran to meet her and relieve her of her burden.

"It's mother's papers and things," she tearfully told him. "Mother says I'm to stay with you and mind them. But, oh, I did so want to stop and help Maple Leaf to save the poor hens. They'll be roasted alive, sure."

"Has the fire jumped the clearing?" Dan asked her. "Has it got to the house?"

"No. Sergeant Silk's there," Betty explained, as if this fact were an assurance that the dwelling could not possibly be involved. "But it's full of smoke, and the heat's just awful, and the horses and cows are mad to get away. Joan was goin' to let them out, but Sergeant Silk stopped her, and told her to come down here with mother."

Dan carried the tin box across to the far end of the bridge, followed by Betty and the two dogs. As, having deposited the box in a place of safety and tied the dogs to a tree, he turned to come back, he looked anxiously from side to side across the creek.

"Look, Betty, look!" he cried. "See how it's spreadin'!"

The whole of the eminence on which the homestead was built was surrounded by leaping, writhing flames, excepting only along the stream.

To the southward the fire had swept across a wide stretch of prairie grass and patches of scrub, and was creeping unhindered to the wooded bank of the creek, as, on the other hand, it had traversed the field of oats. Only the ploughing of the clearing had arrested its progress between the burning pine trees and the back of the house, as Dan and Percy's back-fire had stopped it from reaching the steadings.

But from the smouldering ground, left red by the burnt-up oats, it was spreading along a line of maple and hickory saplings to the band of the creek, and the wind was steadily driving it onwards towards the wooden bridge.

The smoke-laden air was filled with sparks and burning twigs, and jets of flame were hopping along the ground and down the

slope to the water's edge. A clump of dry sage grass, ignited by a flying spark, was rising into flame around one of the pinewood trestles of the bridge.

Dan saw it as he looked over the rail.

"Say, Betty, we've got to save this bridge," he determined. "No one can get across the creek else."

"No, of course they can't," she answered agitatedly. "But how are we to save it?"

Dan looked at her in perplexity.

"Don't know," he confessed. "Sergeant Silk told me to stop right here. I can't go."

"Where to?" questioned Betty.

"Why, back up to the ranch, to fetch somethin' to carry water in, and someone to help."

"You just wait, then," said Betty. "I'll go instead."

She ran off for the necessary help, and Dan left the bridge and went down the bank to beat out the flames of the sage grass with a branch which he tore from a neighbouring bush. With this branch he went about vigorously beating out every burning twig, working his way forward nearer and nearer to the fringe of the fire, then back to renew his labours over the same ground.

Once he looked over to the farther side of the creek he saw a tongue of flame rise from the long grass, and he ran across by the bridge to stamp it out lest it should spread towards the orchard.

Then back again he ran, to work with desperate energy in arresting the insidious little flames that were spreading up continually among the reeds and sun-dried bushes near the bridge.

His eyes were nipping painfully with pungent smoke, and his face and body were streaming with perspiration. Even here the heat of the conflagration was intense; but he knew that he was suffering far less than those who were at work nearer to the furnace of the burning pine trees.

At last, peering through the rolling reek and the whirling rain of sparks, he saw Betty returning with half a dozen men running towards him carrying water-pails, sickles, axes, and long staves that were swathed in sacks or blankets. One of them was a constable of the Mounted Police. He and the men who were with him were accustomed to fighting the flames of prairie fires, and they went calmly and deliberately to their work.

While a pair of them began at once to cut away the brushwood

and rank grass from beside the bridge, others, helped by Dan and Betty, brought water out of the creek and, soaking their blankets, went about very methodically damping out the jets of flame and loitering sparks.

But though they succeeded for a time in keeping the approach to the bridge and the bridge itself free from flames, yet their efforts did not avail to drive back the quickly advancing tide that was threatening to cut off the homestead and complete the ring of fire.

" Where's mother ? Where's Joan ? " cried Dan in despair. " Why don't they come ? It'll soon be too late ! "

Even as he spoke the space around him was illumined anew by the bright flames climbing up the trunk of a tall larch tree close at hand, roaring and crackling as they reached the feathery branches high aloft. If that tree should fall across the end of the bridge, what hope could there be for anyone to escape ?

Hardly had it caught, when there came a noisy clattering of horses' feet down the slope, and two or three of the Hilton's Jump cowboys came in sight, driving before them the horses that had been released from the stables.

Dan's own mare, Gipsy, with Joan astride of her, was with them. Several of the animals were blindfolded. Near the bridge they were rounded up and sent across one by one.

In the train came Mrs. Medlicott, followed by two teams of plough horses drawing sledges upon which were piled all sorts of household goods that had been hurriedly brought out. A drove of milch cows came after them, with coats or skirts or other wearing apparel bound round their eyes, while Maple Leaf and The Moose That Walks kept them to the bridle-path, urging them on.

The procession of pigs and poultry would have been comic if the circumstances had not been so grave, and the spectacle of the Honourable Percy Rapson with his face begrimed with smoke and his clothes hanging in rags was amusing as he struggled along with a wriggling bulldog under each arm.

Backward and forward between front and rear rode Sergeant Silk, shouting his commands to the attendant Indians and half-breeds, hurrying them onward in the most perfect order, checking all panic, and seeing that not even a barn-door fowl got hurt.

When the last of the farm stock had got safely to the bridge, Silk turned and galloped back to send down the cowboys and ranch hands who had remained behind to make a last attempt to save the dwelling.

Until the fire reached the fringe of the clearing he had hoped that the ploughing of the ground would serve its intended purpose, but when one after another the giant trees crashed down across the furrows, sending dense volumes of resinous smoke and hungry tongues of flame towards the house and steadings, he had decided that the buildings were doomed.

"Say, there's no use doing any more, boys," he cried aloud now as he galloped across Betty's garden and round to the back. "Clear off and help get the people along the trail to Hilton's Jump."

Dave Morrison turned a blackened face towards him and said, coughing :

"I was thinkin' the wind had dropped some, Sergeant. I guess thar's still a chance."

"The wind has sure dropped," nodded Silk, "and, what's more, it's veering round to the south. But we can do nothing more now that the well is empty. Round up your men and get them across the bridge before the fire jumps the creek. We must try to save that crop of wheat and the orchard. Hustle along!"

The foreman seemed curiously reluctant to abandon the place, but he slowly obeyed, and each of the men as he turned to escape caught up something of value to save—a set of harness, a gun, or one of the many articles of furniture that had been hastily brought out to the lawn in front of the verandah. One of them even plucked a rose-bud from the trellis by the door, and another took up a flitch of bacon.

Sergeant Silk did not immediately follow them. Instead, he dismounted, tied up his horse, and went round among the outhouses to make sure that no living thing was forgotten. Then he entered the house, and came out carrying Joan Medlicott's work-basket and a coloured portrait of Queen Victoria, which he placed with other articles of salvage on the lawn.

In a momentary lull of the roar of flames he heard his name called from somewhere near the bridge. With one last look round, he remounted and rode off down the bridle-path.

"Silk! Sergeant—quick!" It was Dan Medlicott's voice calling to him excitedly.

Dan had seen the foreman and the last of the ranch hands and cowboys go by, and he had been watching for Sergeant Silk.

"Where's the sergeant," he cried to Denis O'Connor, who brought up the rear.

Denis stopped and glanced round through the mist of smoke and sparks, lowering the flitch of bacon that he was carrying.

"Guess he's comin' on behind," he said. Then, dropping his burden, he added: "Say, I guess I'd best go back an' see."

"Look out!" shouted Dan, leaping forward and pushing Denis before him towards the bridge.

With a resounding crash of splitting timber the tall larch tree swayed over and fell across the path, crackling noisily and sending up a dense cloud of sparks and fiery twigs.

Dan was flung to the ground and pinned down by a flaming branch, but he tore himself away on hands and knees and scrambled to his feet.

The great tree seemed for a moment to have been extinguished in its fall, but even as Dan glanced round at it the glowing, smoking timber burst again into flame, setting fire to the heated brushwood and grass across which it had fallen, and making a formidable barrier, through which it seemed impossible for any horseman to break.

To the left, beyond the broken stump of the prostrate tree, there was a roaring furnace of burning brushwood; to the right there was the creek, with the flaming top of the tree projecting over the bank. Dan saw in an instant what this meant for Sergeant Silk, and it was then that he raised his voice in excited appeal:

"Silk! Sergeant—quick!"

Sergeant Silk came down the incline at an easy gallop, thinking that all was clear for his escape by the bridge. But when he saw the awful barrier of writhing, shooting flames and noisily crackling brushwood in front of him, he drew rein and glanced round in search of an opening. There was none.

To attempt an escape by leaping into the creek would be as surely fatal as to try to get past through the raging fire that menaced him on his right flank, while to turn back would be equally hopeless.

He was hedged in all round, and there was no way out unless he could coax his horse to face the burning tree and clear it at a running jump.

He rode back a few paces, then wheeled the trembling animal round, urging it to a gallop with a sharp touch of the spurs.

The horse went on at full racing stretch increasing its pace as it approached the flaming tree. It seemed as if it were going to take the barrier at a bound; but suddenly it threw up its head with a snort and swerved, and it was only his wonderful horse-

manship that preserved Sergeant Silk from being flung headlong from the saddle into the flames.

He kept his seat, leaning over to pat the animal's arched neck as he rode back at a quiet trot to renew the attempt.

Again he galloped up, but again the horse refused to jump.

Through a gap between the furiously burning branches Dan Medlicott and Denis O'Connor watched the horseman's efforts to get through. They saw him trot back for a third time and then stop and dismount to do something to a stirrup strap and to stroke the mare and talk to her.

"This is his best place," said Dan, "if we could only let him understand."

In the noise of the fire he despaired of making Silk hear his voice calling him to make for this point, where the branches were fewer. But while Silk was out of the saddle he ran back to the rear end of the bridge and seized one of the staves with a blanket wound about its end, and with this over his shoulder he returned and began to beat at the flames. But he was not tall enough to reach the higher branches, and all about him the red-hot ground was strewn with burning twigs and grass, from which the nipping smoke and stinging sparks were rising.

"Why don't he come without the horse?" cried Denis, as Dan drew back.

"That's not his way," returned Dan. "It's the horse he's tryin' to save, more'n hisself."

Denis took the stick now. The blanket, which had been wet, was already smouldering. Taking the staff in his strong hands, he flung it right and left, beating his way in as far as the trunk, where he made a gap of darkness. But a spluttering jet of boiling resin splashed on his hand, and he dropped the staff and sprang back, leaving the smouldering blanket lying across the tree-bole.

Dan brushed past him, and leapt upon the folds of the blanket, shouting aloud as he waved his arms:

"This way! This way!"

It was a foolhardy thing to do, yet he had not thought of the risk. All that he wanted was to let Sergeant Silk see him and understand that here was the safest place through which to get. But his weight caused the now burning blanket to slip and his feet to lose their uncertain hold. He swayed, trying to regain his balance. Missing it and feeling himself falling, he jumped forward, plunging up to his neck in a tangle of burning brushwood.

Fortunately he fell upon his feet, and by keeping his hands aloft he escaped a serious scorching. But he could not turn back. The only course open to him was to fight his way through, beyond the chocking, stifling smoke, and in a very few moments he was running forward, brushing out the sparks that had settled on his clothing.

Sergeant Silk had seen him as he had been about to remount, and now he withdrew his foot from the stirrup and led his horse to meet him.

"Say, d'you want to kill yourself, then?" said Silk in angry reprimand. "What are you here for?"

Dan did not explain.

"You c'n clear the tree there," he cried, pointing to the dark gap by which he himself had come.

But without listening to him Silk seized him and pushed him to the horse's side.

"Into the saddle with you—quick!" he urged. "You're lighter than I am. Save the horse! I'll come after."

Dan instinctively obeyed, never questioning the sergeant's motive. He was astride in a moment, and the mare, feeling strange knees pressing against her throbbing sides, bolted forward with neck oustretched, making straight for the place to which her new rider steered her, never swerving, never faltering, but dashing ahead like an English hunter to a familiar jump.

Just at the fringe of the fiery barrier she came to a sudden check, but it was only to gather herself together to rise with her forefeet in the air and to leap forward and upward with a vigorous push from her hind-quarters.

Alighting in safety on the farther side, she galloped on, snorting, coughing, and racing in an uncontrollable fright, until Dan managed to pull her round at the bridge, facing the darkness, when she came to a halt and stood trembling in every limb.

Dan dismounted, and was hitching the bridle rein to the rail when one of the troopers ran up from the far side of the creek, followed by Antoine and Percy Rapson.

"Where is Sergeant Silk?" inquired the constable. "Have you seen him? What is his mount doing here without him?"

Dan looked back, and was alarmed to see a second larch tree enveloped in flames. It would fall very soon, like the first.

"Quick! We must get at him!" he cried hoarsely. "He's back of that blazing tree. He can't get out. Water, water! Quick! Where are the pails?"

Denis O'Connor came up just then.

"Say, boys, sergeant's ringed round with fire," he announced. "He's corralled, sure!"

"Pails?" cried Percy Rapson in answer to Dan. "I know where they are—at the other end of the bridge! Come, Antoine!"

Four pails were brought across, quickly filled from the creek, and carried to where the trooper and Denis had stationed themselves to fling the contents upon the burning tree. By this time the smaller branches and much of the brushwood had been consumed by the fire, but the immense tree-trunk was red-hot to the core, and all along it there was a high, impassable bank of glowing cinders.

The first four pails of water had little effect, but the hissing of steam had brought Sergeant Silk nearer.

"Say, boys, look out for yourselves if that larch tree falls!" he cried.

They could not see him, nor did he on his part know who they were, but he understood well enough that they had come to his rescue.

"Make a lane through the fire," he advised, "and be smart! The wind has changed. It's blowing up a line of flames at the back of me."

He stood back from the heat, and took up a position in the middle of the narrowing circle of flames, watching and waiting while pailful after pailful of water sent up its column of hissing steam. Presently he saw the end of a plank of timber appear. It was shoved over inch by inch, until it swayed on even balance across the support of the charged and crumbling tree-trunk, where more water was thrown. Then the plank was pushed farther towards him, until its end dropped and fell into the midst of the glowing embers, forming a perilous gangway.

"All right!" shouted Silk, getting ready to start.

Gathering himself together he strode towards the plank, and wading through the burning *débris*, planted his foot cautiously upon it and slowly and very deliberately walked up the unsteady incline.

"Jump, Sergeant, Jump!" cried Percy Rapson.

Steadying himself for an instant, Silk leapt and landed in safety, although sinking up to the knees in a morass of burning charcoal.

"Run! Run!" shouted Dan Medlicott, leading the way back to the bridge.

"Keep to your left!" cried Silk.

He had seen that the second larch tree was swaying over, and he had hardly got half-way to the bridge when with a loud report as of a cannon shot it broke and crashed down with a thud that shook the very ground upon which only a few moments ago he and his rescuers had been standing.

"Anybody hurt, Dan?" Silk inquired, going up to his now quiet horse.

"Not unless it's yourself," returned Dan. "Say, your moustache is half burnt off, and your uniform's all in holes! And where's your hat? Have you lost it?"

"Likely," the sergeant nodded, wiping his grimy face with his bare forearm. "Anybody know how this fire was started? Seems to me it wasn't just an accident."

Percy Rapson drew him aside.

"What do you suspect?" he asked; "Do you really think it possible that it was set on fire on purpose?"

"I did not say so, Percy," returned Silk. "I was only thinking it some strange that it began so directly to the windward of the homestead. There must be something to account for that."

"I've thought that, too," resumed Percy, "and—well, there may be nothing in it, but Maple Leaf says she saw Josh Casterley prowling around in the afternoon."

Sergeant Silk betrayed no surprise at this piece of information. But, then, as Percy reflected, it was very seldom that he betrayed surprise at anything, and at the present moment he appeared to be much more interested in the changing direction of the wind than anything else.

"Good," he said. "We shall have no more trouble to-night. And the ranch-house at least is saved."

Silk had hardly got half-way to the bridge when with a loud report the tree broke and crashed down with a thud.

See page 182.

CHAPTER XXI

SERGEANT SILK IS WOUNDED

That providential change in the wind's direction was the saving of Rattlesnake Ranch. The flames were driven back upon the *débris* of the burnt-out field of oats, where they could do no further harm or could easily be controlled by many willing hands.

On the farther side of the creek several patches of dry grass and inflammable bush had been set alight by flying sparks and burning twigs, but Joan Medlicott and Maple Leaf were there ready to beat out each new outbreak, and the fire was not allowed to spread. The danger to the orchard and the precious crop of standing wheat was thus arrested.

All night long Sergeant Silk and Mrs. Medlicott rode about like officers on a field of battle, giving their commands and directing operations, and before daylight the worst danger was over and the conflagration confined to the wood at the rear of the dwelling-house and steadings.

Here nothing could be done. The ground itself was like a furnace, and there was no possibility of even approaching into the fearful heat of the great mounds of glowing, flaming timber and smouldering charcoal.

For days and days this wide stretch of fallen pines sent forth its resinous reek across the land, threatening with every puff of wind to burst out anew into writhing flames.

"I've seen many a forest fire," remarked Sergeant Silk on the next morning, when he and Percy Rapson and Dan Medlicott mounted to the roof of the ranch-house to look over into the roaring furnace beyond the ploughed-up clearing. "But this one is a new experience. Seems to me that it's just eating its way right down into the earth."

"Say, I guess it's just the old peat, the pine-needles, and roots that have been collectin' there for centuries," said Dan.

"Likely," nodded the sergeant. "But that's usual. This fire goes deeper down than ordinary. And there's a kind of bright

glow about it that puzzles me. Come to think of it, too, there isn't so much smoke as you might expect."

"That's so," agreed Percy Rapson. "If you ask me, it's burning a good deal more like anthracite coal than anything else."

"Eh?" Sergeant Silk looked round at him sharply. "Where have you seen anthracite coal burning?" he asked.

"Why, at home, in England, of course," Percy answered. "I happen to know a good deal about coal. My father is a director of a coal-mining company, you know. He makes heaps of money out of it, especially steam coal."

"Ever come across any lying around on Rattlesnake Ranch?" inquired Silk.

Percy nodded.

"Bits here and there," he responded. "Betty Medlicott brought some into the house the other day. She didn't believe it was coal, though, because it didn't catch fire immediately. Anthracite doesn't. But when it once gets alight it keeps on as if it meant business."

Sergeant Silk pulled at the stubble of his burnt moustache.

"Queer!" he said.

"What's queer?" Dan Medlicott questioned quickly.

"Why," returned Silk, "to think that it's possible that your mother's crops have been flourishing on the top of a coal-field, possibly more valuable than any harvests of grain, and that nobody ever guessed it until now."

"Nobody, excepting Josh Casterley and Nosey Foster," Percy casually rejoined, turning to the ladder by which they had climbed to the roof.

"Josh Casterley?" exclaimed Silk in surprise.

"Yes. Didn't I tell you that he had been prowling around here just before the fire started? Maple Leaf saw him. And she wanted that you should be told, so that you might capture him. But, of course, you couldn't very well have gone scouting after an escaped convict while all this excitement was going on here. It was more important that you should act as chief fireman here than go mooching around after a fox like Josh, wasn't it?"

"Why, cert'nly," agreed the sergeant. "But what makes you so sure that Josh knows anything about the coal?"

Percy did not answer until he had got to the foot of the ladder, and Silk and Dan had joined him. Then he proceeded to tell what Nosey Foster had said to him in the stable at Bankhead.

"You see," he added, "it's clear that Josh had made some discovery on the ranch. And as it wasn't gold or diamonds, or

anything of that sort, you may bet your socks it was the anthracite coal. What puzzles me, however, is to know why he should concern himself about what doesn't belong to him ? "

Sergeant Silk was in no sense puzzled. Knowing of Josh Casterley's hold upon Rattlesnake Ranch, he could easily understand why he should concern himself about the property. The discovery of coal, indeed, was an additional reason why Josh should wish to get the ranch entirely into his own possession.

" You are sure that Maple Leaf made no mistake about it being Casterley ? " he asked.

Maple Leaf herself at that moment came out from the house, and the sergeant went up to her, to be assured that she had made no mistake and to get from her a confirmation of his suspicion that Josh Casterley, either by accident or deliberate intention, was responsible for the fire which had so nearly devastated the ranch.

If Josh were indeed responsible, it was clear that he would not remain in the immediate neighbourhood, and in any case Sergeant Silk could not at once go in pursuit of him while there was still so much to be done in guarding the ranch from a new outbreak and in making habitable the temporary encampment which had been pitched on the farther side of the creek.

His efforts to subdue the fire in the wood were helped considerably on the third day, when rain fell heavily and damped out the smouldering charcoal, enabling him and his assistants to get nearer to the heart of the fire, where it seemed to have penetrated deep beneath the surface. Rain was collected and poured abundantly upon the obstinate embers, and a deep channel was dug from the higher ground to add to the volume of water.

So persistent was the stifling heat that Sergeant Silk became more and more certain that the fire had been feeding upon the fumes from an outcrop of coal, and he was quite serious when he suggested to Mrs. Medlicott that she should call in the help of an expert to investigate with a view to sinking a shaft and starting a mine.

It was not until the fourth day that the fire was finally extinguished. Then began the toil of clearing away the *débris* and the thick coating of black dust that had gathered everywhere about the dilapidated homestead, and it was many weeks before the life of the ranch was comfortably resumed.

Mrs. Medlicott had reason to be thankful that the live stock, as well as the fruit in the orchard and the crop of wheat, had been saved ; but the damage done by the flames was nevertheless considerable, and it represented a very serious financial loss.

As if to prove that troubles never come singly, just when she was beginning to reconcile herself to the effects of the disaster, there came a letter from Monson & Monson, demanding a further payment of interest on the mortgage, and she was thrown rudely back into despair, knowing that she could not meet the demand.

The demand was accompanied by a threat. If the money were not paid within a week, Rattlesnake Ranch would no longer be hers. No mercy would be shown this time, She and her family must go out into the world, homeless and penniless. And winter was already upon them—the awful winter of the far north-west.

"It is more of Josh Casterley's evil work," she declared warmly. "Why has he not been caught? What is the good of the Mounted Police if they allow him to slip through their fingers as they have done?"

"The Police are not to blame, mother," said Joan, as she prepared to turn out the lamp; for it was late, and the rest of the household had gone to bed. "They have enough, and more than enough, to do just now without concerning themselves with a man like Josh Casterley. If it is true that the half-breeds and Indians are on the warpath, the whole force of the Mounted Police will soon be swamped."

"Do you believe that silly report?" questioned Mrs. Medlicott.

"How can you doubt it?" returned Joan. "Dan and Percy have told you what they discovered at Hilton's Jump—what Sergeant Silk told them to-day—that Gabriel Dumont and the *metis* have risen, and that thousands of Indians from the reservations have joined them in arms against the whites. Did not Sergeant Silk say that within a week there will hardly be a farmstead or ranch in Alberta that will not be raided and pillaged?"

"The rebels will not interfere with us here," Mrs. Medlicott tried to persuade herself.

"Let us hope they will not," returned Joan. "But there is no use in hiding the truth from ourselves. Listen! Do you hear? Someone is riding across the bridge! Who can it be, at this time of night?"

The sound of hoofs came quickly nearer; a dog barked, and presently there was a sharp tapping at the door. Joan went forward and shot back the bolt, drawing the door open.

"Sergeant Silk!" she exclaimed.

He walked without a word into the light and looked around. Then he extended his left hand towards Mrs. Medlicott. Both

women noticed that there was a handkerchief bound about his right wrist.

"What has happened?" cried Joan. "You are wounded!"

"Yes," he answered her with apparent unconcern. "Bear's Paw managed to put a bullet into my arm an hour ago. I have ordered my men to move over here, Mrs. Medlicott. You may require their services very soon. What I apprehended and told Dan and Percy has occurred. The half-breeds and Redskins are out on the warpath. They are short of horses, and I fear that they will be paying a visit to your corrals."

"To-night?" cried Mrs. Medlicott in alarm.

Sergeant Silk laid his mittens and his fur cap on the table beside the lamp as he spoke. Then he strode nearer to the stove, and stood looking into the white ash that had fallen to the hearth.

"You have had a cold ride," said Mrs. Medlicott. "I will put some more wood in the fire, and Joan shall make some coffee. Won't you take off your overcoat?"

"If you will help me," he answered her, holding forth his right arm. "Though I shall be going out again very soon. Where is Dan?"

She drew off the sleeve very gently and saw that the cuff of his tunic had been cut away, and that the bandage on his wrist was stained red, as were his hand and fingers. She shrank back a step at the sight, but quickly recovered her calmness.

"Your wound has been skilfully bandaged, I see," she said. "I need hardly offer to dress it anew."

"It is only a flesh wound," he told her. "Best not disturb it."

"How did it happen?" she asked.

"It happened at the camp of Bear's Paw in Lame Duck Coulee," he explained. "We had gone there to caution him and his braves against joining the rebels; but we were too late, they had already thrown in their lot with the half-breeds. They thought we were going to attack them, and they gave us a warmer welcome than we expected. I have come straight here to warn you that you and your daughters and Maple Leaf must prepare to go into the safety of Fort Canmore. Not now—not to-night. You must wait until daylight. You will be safe until then. I have stationed my men on the look-out on the ridges along the trail. They will give the alarm if one is needed. But in the early morning you must quit, see? And you may have to stay away two or three weeks."

Mrs. Medlicott looked up into his handsome face and saw the anxiety in it. She shook her head.

"Two or three weeks?" she repeated.

"Understand," he resumed, "this is not a mere local disturbance. It is a revolt against British rule, and it is spreading all over the North-West territories. None of the settlers and ranches are safe."

Again Mrs. Medlicott shook her head.

"Fort Canmore is hardly more secure than Rattlesnake Ranch," she objected, "not while you and your troopers are away from it. And I understand that most of the Mounted Police have gone north to the Saskatchewan."

"That is so," he nodded. "They are at Battleford, and your Bob with them. There will be fighting up there. But here, too," he added. "And an isolated farmstead like this cannot stand out for long against a tide of savagery. You will go to Canmore?"

"No," she said decisively. "I do not intend to abandon my home. I am not afraid; nor is Joan. Do you suppose that I would leave the place unprotected, for Josh Casterley or his agents to come in unhindered to take possession? That is what he is hoping for. He wants to get hold of the property, and is more eager than ever to make claim to it now that he knows there is a valuable vein of anthracite coal under our cornfields. No, Sergeant; it is good of you to consider our safety, but I intend to remain where I am and to defend the homestead against all our enemies."

Sergeant Silk had been leaning with his arm over the back of a chair, but he stood upright now to allow Joan to mend the fire.

"It will not be easy to defend it against a band of savages and half-breeds such as those that are coming along the trail," Silk told her, very gently, glancing apprehensively towards Joan. "What are your means of defence?"

Mrs. Medlicott inclined her head towards the shining rifles and revolvers in the gun-rack.

"We are well supplied with ammunition," she said firmly. "And Joan and I can both shoot. We have the two boys—Percy and Dan—to help us, and Dave Morrison and the Moose, and all the ranch hands in the bunk-house. We can barricade the doors and board up the windows I have been through an Indian raid, Sergeant. I know what to do."

Sergeant Silk smiled grimly.

"Exactly," he said. "That is what I wanted you to say. I wanted you to show that you are a woman of spirit. Take all proper precautions and you will be as secure here as in the ill-defended shack, misnamed a fort, at Canmore."

Joan crushed a small tin kettle of water into the burning logs of the stove.

"Please do not make any supper for me, Joan," said Silk. "I really don't need any."

She rose to her feet.

"You only say that to save me trouble," she murmured. "You can't do without food any more'n you can do without sleep, and I can see you've been depriving yourself of both. Take a seat in the arm-chair for a while. There's no need to hustle. You've said so yourself."

He scanned her face as if to discover how his sudden call for preparation affected her. She betrayed no alarm.

"It won't frighten you, will it, if we have to turn this room into a kind of shooting-gallery?" he said.

She took the brightly polished coffee-pot from the shelf and smiled at him reassuringly.

"It will not be pleasant," she answered him. "But you know I am accustomed to rifles. You will trust me not to be a coward, won't you?"

"Why, cert'nly," he responded, moving back a step towards the chair. "Still, it is a serious thing, a rising among savages. And you—a girl! You must never lose your head, whatever happens. And you must never trust to anyone outside your own household. You must never let yourself fall into their hands. You understand me?"

"I understand," she signified, facing him unflinchingly.

"You are stronger than I thought," he said, seating himself in the chair.

Joan turned sharply at the sound of a quick footstep on the stairs.

"I thought you were in bed and asleep, Dan," she said as he entered, buckling his belt.

"You might have indulged in another hour," added Sergeant Silk.

"It was the poundin' of your horse's hoofs on the bridge that wakened me," said Dan, glancing sideways at the bandage on the sergeant's wrist. "I guessed it was you, and I couldn't have gone to sleep again, knowin' just why you'd come. Say, I reckon you'll be wantin' me, eh? And Percy? I've wakened him. He'll be down in a minute. I see you're hurt, some. Right hand, too. That's bad. Who's prowlin' around outside?"

There was a shuffling of moccasined feet on the floor of the verandah.

"Guess it's Antoine," said Silk. "You might let him in."

Antoine entered, wearing his heavy fur coat, upon which there was a sprinkling of snow. He took off his beaver-skin cap, revealing his long black hair, and bowed very humbly to Mrs. Medlicott and Joan. He thrust out his right hand to Dan, who took it in silence.

Silk beckoned to him.

"Go down to the bunk-house, Antoine," he directed, "and tell Dave Morrison to bring his men—all of them—right here. Let them bring their guns and cartridge belts. Tell Rippling Water to saddle up Dan Medlicott's mare, and then see that the stables are securely locked and barred."

Antoine nodded.

"Yes, Sar-jean," and was turning to go when Silk detained him.

"Wait!" he said. "You need not disturb them just yet. Stay where you are."

He glanced round at Joan, who was pouring boiling water into the coffee-pot; then to the staircase, where Percy Rapson had just appeared, rubbing his eyes.

"How do, Percy?" the sergeant greeted him. "Say, you're just the chap I wanted. You're no longer a tenderfoot in this sort of business. When you've cleared your eyes of sleep there's something I want you to do. I want you to superintend the barricading of the windows, close the shutters and fasten them, upstairs and down. Then you can get out all the firearms, see that they're in good working order; load up the magazines, and see that Mrs. Medlicott's stock of ammunition is handy and ready for use. Joan will help you, soon as she has got through with her hospitalities."

"Right you are," returned Percy, rolling up his shirt-sleeves. He had come down without any coat. It had often been remarked of him lately that he had abandoned all his foppishness and had taken to imitating the ranchers' rough-and-ready ways.

"And what about me?" inquired Dan. "Am I to have no duties?"

"You are presently coming out along with me," Silk intimated. "Where is the girl—Maple Leaf? And where is my little friend Betty?"

"Betty had better stop where she is—in bed—hadn't she?" interposed Mrs. Medlicott, tying the strings of her large working apron and baring her arms as if she intended to prove that she was capable of doing a man's part in the defence of her homestead.

"No," Sergeant Silk shook his head. "She is not too young to

help. She can get out the lint and bandages, and see that there is plenty of fresh drinking-water in the house, in case anyone is hurt. And, if necessary, she can lend a hand in loading up the guns."

"You seem to be preparing for a regular siege," smiled Percy Rapson.

"Exactly," nodded the sergeant. "It's as well to be ready. And everyone should know his respective station."

"Here is Maple Leaf," announced Mrs. Medlicott. "Do you want her, Sergeant?"

"I only wished to be sure that she is on the alert," said Silk, turning his critical eyes upon the girl who stood in the doorway of the scullery, looking exceedingly Indian with her long black hair hanging down over her shoulders that were covered with a conspicuously red and yellow blanket. "She is one of your best shots, I believe. She had better take up her post at the little dormer window above the front porch. Joan will take command of the front rooms upstairs, Percy at the back. The men will remain down here, where there is more danger."

Joan had filled a cup with coffee, and her mother had prepared a plate of sandwiches and buttered biscuits, and brought out the remains of a home-made cheese.

"Eat," she urged, pushing the cup towards Sergeant Silk, across the table.

"Thank you," he nodded, adding milk and sugar. "And may I ask for a cup for Antoine? He has saved my life to-night; and at the risk of his own."

"Ah, but then——" protested the half-breed. "My own it is so ver' leetle important. It ees not comparable with de lif' of Sar-jean Seelk. What would you?"

"I would have you take a good supper, my friend," said Silk, passing the plate of food to him.

Antoine solemnly crossed himself before eating. He was an exceedingly devout Catholic.

Meanwhile, Percy and Mrs. Medlicott, Joan and Maple Leaf went about securing the double window-shutters from inside and out, leaving the lower sash of each window open to give access to the loopholes which had been made by way of precaution when danger from the Indians had threatened in the old days.

When Antoine had mounted his waiting horse and ridden off with his message to the bunk-house, Sergeant Silk lighted his pipe and sat in comfortable indolence in front of the stove, giving a suggestion now and then, or consulting with Mrs. Medlicott concerning the defences. Presently he closed his eyes

and lay back in his chair as if courting sleep. Joan spread a rug over his knees.

"Thank you," he murmured. "It is true I haven't slept for two nights."

But when Dave Morrison came in, followed by Antoine, Rippling Water, and half a dozen of the men, he was instantly alert, and gave his commands sharply, decisively, telling each where to stand and how to act.

"Lower the light, Mrs. Medlicott," he said, taking up his busby-shaped fur cap and buckskin mitts. "And now, Antoine, give me a lift on with my coat, and come with me. Dan—Rip—come along! Dave, shut the door behind us, and be ready all the time."

Dan had thrust his revolver into his pocket, covering it with his overcoat, and Antoine and Rippling Water were similarly armed.

Sergeant Silk led them out into the darkness beyond the garden gate to where four saddled horses were hitched to the tying-post. There was no moon, and the clouded sky obscured the stars. A bitterly cold wind was blowing from the north-east, bringing with it a powdering of snow.

"Where are we going?" Dan Medlicott asked, pulling on his buckskin gloves. "Are we going to the corrals?"

"Why, cert'nly," said Silk. "I guess that's where the enemy will show up first. You see, they're wanting remounts. They want nothing else but horses just now. They're well provided with food and firearms."

Dan looked up at him as he untied his horse's halter from the rail.

"Do you mean that they're not liable to go to the house?" he asked. "Do you mean that all the preparations you've just been makin' aren't really needed?"

Silk gathered the reins over his horse's neck and stood ready to mount.

"Liable, yes. They're liable to do anything they're not expected to do. But they're not likely to run the risk of an attack on the house just now unless they have a notion that they will find me there. They're rather anxious to wipe me out, you see. They want, indeed, to clear out every member of the Force. No police, no white man's law, no prohibition of whisky. That is their object. They want to do away with British rule altogether, you see. They think that if they attain that object and can go free about the prairies as they used to do in the early days when there weren't any reservation boundaries, they will be

happy ever after, and that the buffalo will come back to the plains for them to hunt, and everything will go smoothly."

"Dat is all ver' true," muttered Antoine, flinging a leg over his horse's back and settling himself in the saddle. "Indian he no want to civilise. He want for mek de sun-dance, tek de scalp, go de warpath, keep de prairie all for self, and 'ave jolly good tam. What?"

Silk, Dan, and Rip mounted also, and they started off, riding silently down the bridle-path among the gaunt blackened stumps of the trees which had been destroyed by the fire two months before. They crossed the bridge in single file, going slowly so that they might make little noise. Then they turned northward along the farther bank, between the creek and the orchard, until they came to a willow bluff where the river forked, and beyond which were the corrals, crowded with horses.

"Wait here," ordered Sergeant Silk, and, dismounting, he handed Dan his bridle-rein to hold.

Dan watched him walking very cautiously and quietly away under the deep shadows of the willow trees. At the extreme end of the bluff he came to a halt, watching and listening, hardly to be distinguished from the dark bushes among which he crouched.

"*Attendez!*" whispered Antoine. "Wait leetle tam. You see him mek signal."

Presently among the bushes there appeared the tiny flame of a match. Dan could see the sergeant shielding it from the wind in the opening of his fur coat. Then there was a sudden dazzling flare of vivid silvery light as from burning magnesium wire.

"*Très bien!*" nodded Antoine, as the flash went out. And he turned and pointed over the far-stretching acres of stubble to where beyond the buffalo trail and the swamp Dan could faintly discern the dark pine bluff, where months ago he had encountered the cinnamon bear and first met Sergeant Silk. After some minutes of waiting, an answering signal flashed dimly in the distance.

"It's all right, boys," said Silk when he returned. "I don't think we shall be troubled any to-night. But we can't be sure. Antoine, you take Rippling Water round to the rear of the corrals, and keep watch and watch about. Dan and I will take our station at this side."

Rippling Water looked back at him.

"Say, Sergeant, are we to shoot if we see any Indians prowlin' around? They'll send out scouts at first. Are we to go for them?"

"Well, yes," returned the sergeant. "We are here to protect

the horses, and we've got to do it by some sort of persuasion. Shoot if you need to. That is to say, fire your guns over their heads by way of challenge. I don't tell you to do any damage, even to a Redskin, unless in self-defence. If there's trouble, you've only yourself to depend on, see ? "

There were four separate enclosures, each surrounded by a high palisade of pine logs, and the four gates faced a wide lane of grass, through which a stream trickled.

Dan slipped to the ground and led the two horses, while Sergeant Silk walked in front of him, stopping near the tall, stout gate of the biggest of the corrals.

" Guess we'll take it in turns of two hours each, Dan," Silk suggested.

" Sleepin' here in the lee of the gate," agreed Dan.

" That's it. You'll get shelter from the cold wind there."

" And the horses ? "

" We'll keep them saddled."

" What about your troopers ? " Dan inquired.

" Oh, they'll come along if there's any need. Say, you take first turn to sleep. You can use my blanket to keep the wind out of your knees. It's some cold. But we'd best not light a fire to betray where we are."

Dan curled himself up in a sheltered corner of one of the heavy upright posts and closed his eyes ; but it was a long time before he fell asleep, and he seemed hardly to have lost his consciousness of the cold and discomfort when he felt a hand on his arm.

He sat up, and to his surprise discovered Sergeant Silk sitting on a log beside him.

"What's up, Sergeant ?" he inquired. "It isn't two hours yet ?"

" No. Hardly one."

" Then why did you wake me ? "

Sergeant Silk's answer astonished him.

" Say, Dannie," he said wearily, quite unlike his usual sharply decisive answer. " I just wanted to ask you to change watches with me—give me the first turn. I've kind of lost my grip on sleep. Dare say I'm weakened some, for want of it ; and I thought maybe if I was to take the first watch, after all—— Well, you see, I guess that scratch on my arm hasn't done me a heap of good."

Dan was on his feet in an instant. It had suddenly occurred to him that this strong, redoubtable rider of the plains was ill, that his wound and the loss of blood had been more serious than he had made out.

"Say, Sergeant," he said, trying to cover his alarm. "Why didn't you wake me before? Lie down here, right now. You need rest heaps more'n I do. Lie down, and don't think of stirrin' till daylight. I'm goin' to watch all the time. I'll rouse you if anything happens."

"Say, now, that's real friendly, Dan," returned the sergeant very gently. "But it's no use just yet awhile. I couldn't go to sleep right away. Guess I'm too—weak, or something."

"All right," said Dan, now fully awake. "Try it kind of gradually. You'll drop off after a while. But I'm goin' to keep watch till daylight anyhow."

"Very well, boy," nodded Silk. "If that's the way it hits you, I'll just hang around until I get sleepy."

Dan Medlicott shrugged his shoulders with assumed indifference and strode slowly away to make the round of the corrals, keeping close within the shadows of the walls. He went very quietly, like a policeman on his night beat. Beyond the farthest inclosure he met Rippling Water similarly engaged.

"Thought it was Sergeant Silk, at first," said Rip. "Thought you was having a snooze. How's this?"

"Sergeant's some sleepy, and not very well," returned Dan.

"Oh!" said Rip in surprise. "That's queer. He was lively enough when he was round here a bit ago. Never saw him more surely awake!"

"Well, he'll be none the worse for a spell of rest," said Dan, turning on his heel and strolling back to his post.

Sergeant Silk had not moved from the log on which he was sitting.

"It's all serene around there," Dan reported on his return.

There was silence between them for a long time. Silk was not attempting to sleep. He had drawn his revolver and was spinning the chambers round. Dan watched him, and Silk, glancing upward, knew that he was being watched.

"Tricky kind of weapons, these," he observed. "I got one jammed once. This one works all right. It's a decent bit of machinery, but new, and I don't care for new guns as a rule." He drew a second one from his belt. "This here one, now, is just about the best six-shooter I've ever carried. It would drop an ox at fifty yards. An Enfield, it is. Say, you haven't got yours on your hip, Dannie, have you?"

Dan shook his head.

"No," he responded. "I keep it loose in my jacket pocket."

"That's not right," said Silk. "Fix it properly. You take too many chances, keeping your overcoat buttoned on top of it."

Dan opened his overcoat.

"I'm not likely to need it to-night," he smiled.

"Still——" pursued the sergeant, breaking off abruptly. "Say," he presently added, "I've fixed the horses differently. Yours and mine. Brought them up and stood them in the angle between this corral and the next. They're more handy there, and better sheltered from this frosty wind." He looked up at the sky. The clouds were more broken now, and the stars shone brightly overhead. "There'll be no moon until close upon dawn," he concluded.

Dan was watching him closely, thinking that there was something strange in his manner. For one who complained of being weak and weary there was a curious alertness in the way he spoke and seemed to be listening at the same time to every tiny sound that mingled with the tinkling of the stream and the occasional restless movement of a horse in the corral.

"You see, on a dark night like this," he presently resumed, rising to his feet and peering outward across the grass, "you've got to depend on your ears as well as your eyes. And Indians are so crafty, so silent. You might easily mistake one of them for a tuft of sage-grass, and you've got to be ready." His hand went round to his hip, and Dan saw the dim gleam of his revolver as he raised it. "But if you were to notion that the bush wasn't a bush but a Redskin, this is what you'd do. You'd take careful aim at it, so. And maybe, if you weren't just sure, you'd count three. Just one, two, three!"

There was a flash from his weapon as he pulled the trigger.

Dan sprang aside, startled by the unexpected shot, but as he did so he heard a cry from out the darkness and felt the grip of Sergeant Silk's strong left hand upon his wrist.

"Quick! This way!" Silk urged, dragging him away. "It's them!"

Even as he was being dragged round through the shadows of the palisade, Dan realised and understood exactly his companion's subterfuge. Sergeant Silk had suspected that the Indians were coming, but not being certain, and not wishing to give a false alarm, he had wakened Dan on the plea that he himself was weak and wanted sleep. But, as a matter of fact, Rippling Water had been right. Sergeant Silk had never been more wakeful and alert.

"It's them!" he repeated, as the far-off sound of horses' hoofs came towards them. "Bend low. Keep in the shadows. Get to your saddle, and be ready."

Their two horses were only a few yards away. Dan mounted, but Silk stood by his broncho's side.

"Watch for the police coming round by the bluff," he said very calmly. "Don't mistake them for Indians. Join them when you can. Antoine and Rip are coming behind you. We'll stick together, see?"

He swung himself into his saddle as they rode up, and drawing his rifle from its boot he waited, listening in the shelter of the angle between two of the corrals.

All four of the gates were in view and within gunshot. Silk had the outermost position, and he was facing the direction from which the raiders were approaching at a quick gallop, making no sound but the clatter of their horses' hoofs. He leant over his broncho's neck, with his rifle at the ready. Antoine, who was close to him, had also a repeating rifle, and he was the first to shoot as the Indians rode past to make the circuit of the corrals. Then the sergeant's gun was heard firing three shots in quick succession, which were promptly replied to by the Redskins.

The ambush of the four defenders had been discovered by the flashing of their guns. The rustlers divided, a party of them breaking off and sweeping round to the attack.

Sergeant Silk was ready, however, and anticipating this move, he wheeled about and, followed by his three companions, raced out of his ambush and darted into another angle between two other corrals. He was favoured by the darkness, and the Indians dashed by without discovering him.

Silk waited for the last of them to pass. Then his gun rang out its four remaining bullets. Antoine fired also, emptying his magazine, and putting aside his rifle, as Silk had done, and taking out his revolver.

Dan Medlicott and Rippling Water had been ordered to reserve their fire for self-defence, or to discharge their weapons only with the purpose of making the raiders believe that the defenders were more numerous than they really were; and, beyond all things, they were not to expose themselves unnecessarily.

"Keep cool, boys," said the sergeant, himself as calm as if he were drilling recruits in the barrack-yard. "Remember this isn't a battle. All we've got to do is to protect Mrs. Medlicott's horses and keep the rascals busy until the troopers come along. Hullo!" he cried, as a bullet whistled past him and struck one of the rails of the stockade. "Seems they've found us. Quick! After m —round the corral!"

As he rode out he turned in his saddle and discharged

revolver towards a mob of the Redmen, who were charging down the central lane, hunting for the defenders. Their bullets whistled around, and the night air was filled with the crackle and smoke of their guns, but in the darkness the Indians, always poor marksmen with firearms, could only take random aim, and none of the four was hurt.

Silk galloped round to the angle where he had at first taken cover, and the Redskins, searching for him in vain, raced out in a body to make a second circuit of the corrals, to fire inward as they passed each opening, and to be assailed by a cross fire from the two reloaded rifles as they flashed athwart the far end of the lane.

Silk wheeled then and waited for them to reappear at close range, but while they were yet hidden by the intervening walls there came the sound of galloping horses from a new direction.

"It's the Police," cried Rippling Water.

Silk took out his whistle and blew a shrill blast to let the troopers know where he had stationed himself.

"Slip out and make for home, Rip," he ordered sharply. "Ride back to the ranch-house and send some of the boys here to help. We're not enough of us." Then, as Rippling Water moved to obey, he turned to Dan. "Better stay where you are, Dan," he said. "Keep in cover and don't shoot or show yourself unless you're attacked. When you've a chance, ride across to the bluff and wait till the boys come from the ranch."

As he spoke, a band of the Indians dashed into the lane and made for one of the farther corrals. Some of their companions had dismounted, scaled the palisade, and broken open the gate, and now these others were riding forward to rush in and stampede the horses.

Dan Medlicott watched Sergeant Silk and Antoine dart out in pursuit, and it was only the sergeant's command which restrained him from joining them. Antoine was in advance, firing over his horse's ears. Silk was firing also. In the darkness it was difficult to follow their movements, but suddenly, as Dan watched, he saw Silk turn abruptly to the left and disappear into the opening between two of the corrals with some half-dozen Indians racing behind him.

At the same moment a heavy pounding of hoofs quite close to him caused Dan to look aside, and he saw four of the Mounted Police and about a dozen cowboys ride past him, spurring their hargers onward.

Instinctively, and in spite of Sergeant Silk's instructions to him

that he was to make for the shelter of the willow bluff as soon as he got a chance, Dan rode after the four troopers. But they soon outdistanced him, and he was left far behind while they rushed into the crowd of Redskins at the corral gate, scattering them in a wild panic.

Dan turned to the left by the way that Sergeant Silk had gone. He rode out into the open, but he had hardly got beyond the shadows of the corrals when he realised the danger into which he had thoughtlessly rushed. The Indians, driven from the gate by the troopers, had swept round and were riding down upon him, yelling and whooping like fiends let loose.

He could see nothing of Sergeant Silk or the Redskins who had pursued him. He was alone, and it would have been madness to face the torrent of savages now sweeping towards him. He pulled Gipsy round, and digging his spurs into her flanks, put her to the gallop and made the best of his way to the bluff, never pausing until he gained the cover of the willows.

There he halted and waited, listening to the battle that was going on around the corrals. He could see nothing but the flashing of rifle and pistol and the occasional passing of a shadowy horseman along the ridge of the rising ground that stood out black against the lesser darkness of the sky.

Gradually the firing subsided, and Dan could hear only a stray shot or two in the far distance, which seemed to indicate that the Indians had gone off and were being pursued by the Police.

Then there was complete silence until after about a quarter of an hour there came to him the clatter of horses' feet on the bridge, and presently Rippling Water rode up, followed by eight of the ranchmen.

"Say, you're too late," cried Dan, joining them. "It's all over."

"Are the horses safe?" Dave Morrison inquired.

"Don't know," Dan answered. "The Indians forced one of the corral gates; but I guess they were stopped in time."

Percy Rapson was at his side as they rode up the slope.

"We heard the shooting," he said. "Why didn't Silk let us come along with him instead of cooping us all up there doing nothing in the house? We've had a rotten time, being out of it all."

They found Antoine posted on guard at the open gate of the farthest corral. He had lighted a torch of pine wood, and by its light they could see that the horses were safe.

"Where's Sergeant Silk?" Percy asked him.

Antoine did not know. He supposed that he had gone off in pursuit of the Indians with the troopers and cowboys.

"I vote we some of us go after them and see if we can help," said Percy. "Are you coming, Dan?"

They waited for a while, and a party of them were preparing to ride off, when they heard horses approaching. The Police and their cowboy companions had abandoned the chase and had returned. Dan looked among them for Sergeant Silk, but did not see him.

"Wasn't he with you?" he inquired of one of the troopers.

"No," came the surprised answer. "Where is he?"

No one seemed to know.

"Say, he hasn't been—hurt, has he?" someone whispered.

More torches were lighted, and a search was made round and about the corrals.

Dan Medlicott made straight for the place at which he had last seen Sergeant Silk disappearing between two of the corrals. Percy Rapson and Rippling Water went with him. They went slowly outward, searching the ground.

"There was a gang of Redskins after him," said Dan. "But he was well in advance. Are you sure he didn't go back to the ranch?"

"That's about the last thing he'd have done when there was work on hand," Percy decided.

"What's that over there?" questioned Rippling Water, pointing before him into the gloom.

He ran forward, swinging his torch. The others followed him. He stopped abruptly beside a dark object that lay very still on the ground.

"It's Sergeant Silk's horse, sure," he said. "And it's dead. Where's Sergeant Silk?"

Dan and Percy agreed with him that it was Silk's horse and no other, but there was no sign of its owner.

They extended their search, but could find no trace. Rippling Water ran back to the corrals to summon help.

All the men from the ranch, the cowboys and troopers joined in the search. They searched for hours, in all directions, until the moon had risen, until the sky grew pale with the light of dawn, until the sun rose red above the misty hills; but not a sign of Sergeant Silk could they find.

"Do you suppose—do you think it possible," questioned Percy Rapson, "that he has been captured and carried off by the Indians?"

He addressed the question to one of the Mounted Police.

The trooper nodded.

"It's the only possible explanation," he answered.

CHAPTER XXII

A FORLORN HOPE

JOAN MEDLICOTT shivered and drew her fur cloak more closely about her shoulders.

"Say, Betty, that stove's needin' more wood," she said, breaking the silence of the room. "Suppose you put some on. You're nearer than I am."

Betty yawned sleepily and leant over to stretch a hand out to the log-box at her side.

"Never saw such a fire-place for swallerin' logs and never blinkin' as this one," she said, crushing a billet of pine wood into the embers.

"But you've got no sort of objection to settin' by while the log-swallowin' business goes on," returned her elder sister. "You'll sure get chilblains, settin' so near."

"Don't mind a whole lot, even if I do," said Betty. "It's so cold waitin' here out of bed like this. Say, I wish something'd happen, don't you, Joan?"

"Guess a good deal has happened, way down at the corrals," said Joan very gravely. "All that shootin' and yellin' meant a lot. Surely you don't regret that the fightin' wasn't here in the house, do you?"

"Course I don't," Betty resumed. "But, you see, we've been right out of it, and never been allowed to see anything. I wanted to take part in it. I wanted to see Sergeant Silk real busy among the Injuns, with the bullets flyin' around and him dodgin' them and never gettin' hurt any."

Joan drew a deep breath.

"Even Sergeant Silk can't be expected to escape every time," she said half-fearfully, remembering the wounded wrist of which he had made so light. "You've an idea that he leads a kind of charmed life; but he's just human, the same as you and me or anyone else, and—well, you don't know but what even now he's lying wounded down there across the creek."

Mrs. Medlicott moved uneasily in the chair in which she had been sitting for the past two hours with a loaded rifle across her knees.

"Why doesn't someone come back and tell us what has happened?" she wondered. "They must know that we are anxious; and all the fighting seems to be over. They've been quiet for a long time now."

She glanced round the room and towards the door. The pale, steely greyness of the winter dawn was creeping in through the loopholes of the heavily shuttered windows, shedding points of light on the polished brass of the candlesticks on the dresser and the neatly arranged rows of rifle cartridges on the table, and casting curious shadows from the antlers of moose and cariboo that decorated the walls.

"Quiet?" echoed Joan. "Yes; maybe they're following on the trail of the Indians. Perhaps they're trying to recapture our stolen horses. You can't expect them to come back until they've finished their work, and Sergeant Silk isn't the man to do things by halves."

"Believe I hear someone comin'," declared Betty, after a long spell of silence, rising excitedly from beside the stove and crossing to the window.

She looked out through one of the loopholes across the patch of lawn that was sprinkled with snow, and down the bridle-path towards the bridge.

"Say, it's Dan and Percy," she announced. "And Percy's carryin' a warrior's head-dress, all feathers and ermine. Goin' to keep it as a trophy, I suppose."

Joan hastened to unlock and open the door, and the two boys dismounted and entered, looking curiously about the room.

"Say, Joan, have you heard or seen anything of Sergeant Silk?" Dan inquired. "We can't find him."

Joan's face went suddenly very white, and she gave a little start of agitation; but she controlled her alarm.

"You can't find him?" she cried. "But he cannot be lost. Where was he last seen? He hasn't been here since you went out with him."

"We've found his horse," Percy explained. "It's been shot dead. We believe he has been captured and carried off by the Indians."

Mrs. Medlicott had stood up, betraying her consternation.

"Captured?" she echoed, laying her gun across the table. "Then he is still alive. They would never have taken his dead

body. Wretches ! Brutes ! They intend to torture him ! It is horrible ! Has anyone gone after them ? "

" Yes," Dan answered her. " You needn't worry about that. The Mounted Police, Antoine, the Moose, and all the boys have gone off on their trail."

" But you—you and Percy ? " she cried. " Why have you come back here ? Knowing his peril, why haven't you gone with the others to find him and rescue him ? "

Dan looked back at his mother a little annoyed that she should think he had neglected a duty.

" We're goin' right now," he assured her. " We came home to let you know about it. Percy and I are both goin'. But as we're liable to be away days instead of hours, we reckoned we'd best take somethin' to keep us alive, see ? And Percy needs a better mount than old Phœnix. Guess we'd be as well to take a pack-horse, too."

" Sure," nodded Mrs. Medlicott. " That's kind of wise." She turned to Joan. " Come, Joan, quick," she urged. " Let us get food ready."

She went to the foot of the stairs to call Maple Leaf. But the Indian girl was already coming down.

She glided very silently across the room to where Dan and Percy stood.

" Something has happened to Sergeant Silk, you say," she said softly. " That is bad. He is brave, he is strong ; but his arm is hurt and he is alone. He cannot easily escape. Listen ! " she went on. " You say that the Police, Antoine, my father, and the boys have gone off, following on the trail of the Indians ? "

Dan nodded.

" Yes. Why ? "

" I think they have gone on the wrong trail," she answered.

" What ? " cried Percy Rapson. " What makes you think that ? "

Maple Leaf shrugged her shoulders under the bright-coloured blanket that covered them.

" I do not know," she responded vaguely. " I only think. All through the night I have been upstairs at the little window above the front porch, where Sergeant Silk said that I was to be. I have been watching. I have been listening, and I have heard and seen many things. Not long ago, as the day was breaking, I saw the men riding away from the corrals northward to the mountains where many of the Indians had gone. That is so, yes ! How many Indians and half-breeds were there in all, do you think ? "

"Guess there was 'bout fifty," Dan told her. "And they went, as you say, northward to the mountains."

"But not all of them," Maple Leaf declared. "They did not go all together."

"Dunno 'bout that," returned Dan, meditatively filling his bandolier with cartridges. "But what has that to do with Sergeant Silk, anyway?"

Maple Leaf stood very still, showing no agitation. She had been awake all night, but her bright big eyes betrayed no weariness.

"It is what I want to understand," she rejoined softly. "Sergeant Silk is in great danger; he must be helped. You say he has been carried off by the Indians; he must be rescued. It would be very bad if he were to be tortured and put to death by the Redmen."

"Sure," agreed Dan.

"What does Maple Leaf know?" interposed Mrs. Medlicott, coming out from the pantry with a bag of biscuits.

Maple Leaf turned to her mistress.

"I think that the Indians divided," she continued in explanation. "I could not see. It was too dark. I could only hear; and as I listened I heard a band of about twenty riders racing southward along the old buffalo trail. They were Indians, sure."

"How do you know they were Indians if you couldn't see them?" questioned Percy Rapson. "Perhaps they were some of the cowboys from Hilton's Jump."

Maple Leaf shook her head decisively.

"The horses were not shod," she answered. "One can always tell the difference in the sound of their hoofs—what? And, again, it seemed to me, though I am not sure—because there was so much shooting going on round the corrals—it seemed to me that I heard someone—a man—calling aloud for help."

Dan and Percy exchanged glances of surprise.

"She's right, I believe," exclaimed Dan. "It must have been Silk. They must have seized him just at the moment when the Police came along. I saw him myself dashing through the gap between two of the corrals with a gang of the savages chasin' him. That was the last I saw of him. I reckon they fired after him, killed his horse, and seized him when he fell."

Mrs. Medlicott caught at Maple Leaf's wrist.

"What was it that you heard him call?" she asked eagerly.

"But I did not hear the words clearly," said Maple Leaf. "It was from a far way off that they came; but they sounded like: 'This way, boys!' and then there came a cry for help."

"There was no one—no white man—but Sergeant Silk who could have needed help just then," reflected Dan. "And if it was truly Silk that Maple Leaf heard, then the boys have sure gone off on the wrong trail."

"And, of course, there's not a bit of good in our going after them," added Percy.

"That's so," agreed Dan. "Say, we ought to go along to the buffalo trail instead. But, you see, we're only two, and——" he hesitated, glancing towards his mother, "and we can't very well leave the house unprotected."

"You need hardly consider that," interposed Mrs. Medlicott. "The Indians are not likely to pay us a second visit, and Joan and I can look after ourselves for the little time while you are away." She paused, and then added: "But I hardly see that you can do very much—two boys against a whole gang of savages. You cannot hope to liberate their captive. What do you expect to accomplish by running into this new danger? It seems to me that you are going out on a forlorn hope."

Percy Rapson moved uneasily on his feet.

"Still, we can't think of leaving Sergeant Silk to his fate without trying our best to help him," he said. "I should never forgive myself. And I'm sure Dan wouldn't."

He looked round at Dan.

"There's no question about it," Dan declared. "We're goin', whatever happens. We can at least find out where he is, and come back for help if he's not already beyond help."

Having assisted to get ready and pack the food which the two boys were to take with them, Maple Leaf drew her blanket closer about her, went noiselessly to the door and, opening it, slipped out.

"It is too early to put out the hens," said Joan, thinking the girl had gone to attend to her customary duties about the farm. "And why has she taken a revolver with her?"

Percy and Dan presently went out also. They discovered Maple Leaf in the stable, leading forth the Indian pony which she was accustomed to ride.

"Where are you going?" Dan asked her. "Why are you taking out a horse?"

She looked very Indian as she stood holding the broncho by its bridle, ready to mount. She always wore the habit of her own people, the deerskin jacket fringed and decorated, the red leather leggings and moccasins, and the inevitable blanket. The one thing in which she differed from most Indian women was

that she kept her long black hair carefully brushed and combed. She bent her head almost guiltily as Dan asked her the question.

"Sergeant Silk has always been very good to me," she answered. "He is brave, he is strong, he is kind. He never thinks of himself, but only of others. There is no one like him in the world. And he is in danger. I am going to find him and to help him—if I can." She looked up and added: "It is better that I go, following upon his trail before the snow covers it. I am Indian. I can go among the Indians. They will not harm me. See?"

Percy Rapson glanced inquiringly at Dan.

"Not half a bad idea, eh?" he said. "Shall we take her with us?"

Dan nodded.

"Yes," he agreed. "The Redskins won't harm her unless they find out that she's spyin' on them; and Maple Leaf's clever enough not to excite their suspicions."

"You ready to start right away?" Maple Leaf inquired.

Percy and Dan signified their readiness by going farther into the stable and bringing out two horses, one for Percy himself to ride instead of old Phœnix, and the other to carry the packs of food and camp outfit.

Half an hour thereafter the three of them were crossing the bridge to the farther side of the creek. There they turned sharply southward in the direction of the old buffalo trail, and Rattlesnake Ranch, with its steadings, ploughed fields, and orchards, was soon hidden from view behind a rise of the rolling prairie.

"Looks as if there was going to be snow before the day's through," remarked Dan Medlicott, glancing anxiously backward to the heavy white bank of clouds that obscured the jagged peaks of the far-off Rocky Mountains. "That will be some awkward for our ponies. A good thing we've brought plenty of grub with us. Mother's given us more than we can eat inside of three days. Guess we shall need it."

"Maple Leaf doesn't look as if she intended us to be from home anything like so long as that, though," returned Percy. "See how she's plugging along! She can hardly have dropped on the trail already. The ground's too hard to show any hoof-prints."

The Indian girl, hunched up on her pony's back, had been going at a steady, even trot; but now she had broken into a gallop.

"I expect she has seen somethin' on the soft marshy bit that she's just crossed," said Dan. "She's quite as clever as her brother Rip at followin' up a trail. Hullo, what's she turnin' back for?"

Maple Leaf had pulled her pony round sharply and was riding back very slowly, leaning over on the off-side and eagerly searching the ground.

While Percy and Dan were riding up, she halted and alighted. Leaving her pony standing unattended, she went about, backward and forward, still searching diligently.

"Guess she's comparin' the hoof-prints," said Dan. "There's plenty of them hereabout. See! Indian ponies, too, for they're not shod!"

"I can see several marks of horseshoes, though," declared Percy.

"Dare say," nodded Dan. "So can I. But they were made by Maple Leaf's own plug."

He called out to Maple Leaf as they drew near to her.

"What you looking for?" he questioned, drawing rein.

Maple Leaf sprang forward at that moment, stooped, picked something from the ground, and, holding it on the palm of her hand, examined it attentively for a few moments.

"I caught sight of something bright lying on the trail as I rode past," she explained. "And I came back to find what it was. It's a button—a brass button with a buffalo's head on it. It's the same as the Mounted Police wear on their jackets. Just you have a look at it and see if it isn't."

She handed the button up to Dan.

"I guess Sergeant Silk dropped it as a sign to show he'd gone along here," she continued. "It's sure been dropped on purpose. You can tell that by the threads. They're not broken. They've been cut with a knife."

Dan turned the button over in his hand and saw that the threads still clinging to it had certainly been cut.

"We're on his trail right enough," he decided, "and as I figure it out, those Indians who captured him have made a bee-line for Lame Duck Coulee. We needn't look for any more signs until we come in sight of their village."

"No, we needn't; but we may as well," said Maple Leaf, and remounting her pony she again went off in advance at a hand-gallop across a wide stretch of rolling prairie towards a range of low, wooded hills.

Once she slowed down, and, looking back, pointed to the

ground, made a signal to the two boys as if to direct their attention to the spot, and then rode on again.

When they came to the place they saw that what she had been looking at was the cross track of many horses leading from the opposite direction.

"It's the trail of the Redskins going to Rattlesnake Ranch," Percy suggested at once.

"That's so," agreed Dan. "They've been ridin' in single file, I'd say. But there must have been more of them than I thought, judging by the way the ground's turned up. I wonder where all the others have made for? We'd best be careful. They might double round and shape for their encampment. We don't want to get nipped in between them and the lot we're followin'."

Beyond this point where the two trails crossed, Maple Leaf turned in a new direction, following on the back trail for the distance of about a mile, when she came to a wide creek, which she crossed. Here she waited until the two boys with their led pack-horse came up to her. It seemed that she had discovered some sign which she wanted to show them. Before they got up to her, she had again dismounted to examine the moist ground. She was following the track of hoof-prints. They led her round in a wide circle.

"Look!" she said. "You see what has happened? The Indians have stopped just here. They have made a ring around their prisoner—Sergeant Silk—so that he should not escape. As far as this, he has been riding on the same horse with one of the Indians. But here they have made him alight. See!" she pointed down to the ground. "Those are the hoof-prints of the horse he rode. They lead off into the middle of the ring."

Dan and Percy watched her following the track into the middle of the circle. At this point there were many hoof-marks; but they were all of the same horse. Where they were thickest they were partly crushed out by the impressions of a pair of moccasined feet and a pair of heavy, thick-soled boots.

"Come here, Dan," she called, standing still and intently examining the ground.

Dan dismounted and went to her side.

"You see," she said, "only one horse, and the footmarks of two men. One an Indian, the other—Sergeant Silk. Look!" she pointed downward. "Those two deeper marks are where he dismounted. You can see the soil turned up by his spurs."

"That's so," agreed Dan. "And they're not cowboy's spurs neither. It's only the Mounted Police who wear spurs like those."

"The Indian has kept very close to him all the time, see," said Maple Leaf. "And—wait!" she cried, following the track of footprints to where a second horse had stood.

Dan noticed that she was betraying considerable agitation as she examined the marks made by Sergeant Silk.

"Well?" he questioned. "What's up?"

"Don't you see?" returned Maple Leaf. "The left foot was not put down firm, like the other. There is no mark of the heel; only the point of the toe! And there, look, the right foot is alone. He has not used the left at all. He is lame!"

"Sure!" nodded Dan. "And badly, too. He's had to hop. Say, they needn't have been afraid of his runnin' away."

"Come!" urged Maple Leaf. "If he is lame, it is all the more reason why we should find him quickly and try to release him."

CHAPTER XXIII

MAPLE LEAF'S MISSION

BEYOND the river the three rode together in close company, and as they entered among the wooded hills they increased their watchfulness, lest they should be discovered by some lurking Indian scout.

At midday they halted in the shadows of a small pine forest, to rest their horses and to take some food. They were already within the frontier of the Indian reservation and not many miles from Lame Duck Coulee, where the village had been located by Sergeant Silk.

Dan Medlicott began to be impatient. He wanted to make certain of coming within sight of the Redskins before dusk, and an additional reason for impatience was that the snow-cloud had gathered overhead and were sending down a few stray warning flakes.

"We are safer here than going any nearer," said Maple Leaf, when he proposed moving. "It would be better to make camp for the night in the shelter of these trees. I can easily find you when I come back."

"When you come back?" repeated Dan. "But where do you think you are going?"

Maple Leaf looked out beyond the gloom of the pine trees.

"I am going to the top of the hill, over there," she answered with determination. "From the farther side I shall be able to look down upon the wigwams of the Indians in Lame Duck Coulee, and know by what I see if it would be safe for us to venture nearer. You and Percy will wait here among the trees until I return. Do not be afraid for me. Remember that I am myself an Indian. No harm will come to me, even if I am discovered, as it might come to either of you."

Dan and Percy hesitated at letting her undertake such an expedition alone and unprotected, and they tried to dissuade her; but she was firm in her resolve.

"Very well, then," Dan yielded at length. "I allow that one is heaps better than many for prowlin' around as you mean to; and you're cleverer at scoutin' than either of us, as well as bein' less

liable to be taken for a spy. Go, and come back quick as you can, for we shall not quit, whatever happens, until you give us a sign."

"Give me two hours," she said. "If I'm not right here by then, you can calculate on something having happened to me, or else that I'm in the camp trying to rescue Sergeant Silk."

She led her horse to the fringe of the timber, where she mounted. Percy and Dan watched her ride across the narrow valley and up the slope of the farther hill. For a time she disappeared behind a bluff of poplars, and when they saw her again she was going slowly along the topmost ridge of the hill. Then, again, she disappeared.

Returning to their hobbled horses, the two boys made a temporary shelter for themselves in a hollow against an overhanging bank. They suspended their blankets over a rope stretched between two trees as a screen from the cold wind, and there they waited. They had brought a bell tent with them, but they would not pitch it until they should know the result of Maple Leaf's journey.

Every now and then one of them went out to the open to see if she were returning; but they discovered no sign of her, and in the meantime snow had begun to fall in earnest. It seemed as though they would have to make camp for the night, and in preparation they went about gathering wood for their bivouac fire.

Two hours had gone by and Dan Medlicott was watching the hill, searching it from end to end and from ridge to base for the first sign of Maple Leaf, when suddenly he heard the padding of a horse's hoofs coming from a direction altogether different from the one by which he had expected the girl to return. He turned sharply and saw her riding towards him. Percy also had heard her coming, and they both went out to meet her, anxious to know what she had learnt.

She did not dismount when she came to a halt beside them. Nor did she speak for many moments, but sat very still, listening.

"They are coming," she said at last. "They are coming along this valley. They will pass close by here. You had better take the three ponies farther in among the trees. We can do nothing. We can only look at them from ambush as they go by."

"Who?" questioned Dan Medlicott. "I don't understand."

Maple Leaf turned and looked down at the snowy ground behind her.

"They will see the trail that I have left," she said anxiously. "I will not hide. I will boldly show myself. Who are they? The Indians! They have broken camp. Their village is moving.

They are trailing northward to join their friends. Soon they will be here with their teepees packed on the travois poles, with their squaws and children, their horses and dogs. And with them they will bring their prisoner."

"Have you seen him?" cried Percy Rapson.

Maple Leaf shook her head.

"They were many miles away," she answered. "But they would not leave Sergeant Silk behind, and he could not escape. He is surely with them. Wait and watch. Do not show yourselves. And when they have passed—if you have seen Sergeant Silk—ride back to the ranch and bring as many men as you can muster to follow on their trail."

"And you——" said Dan. "What do you intend to do?"

"I do not know," she answered. "I will leave it to chance. But I will do the best thing that I can think of to help Sergeant Silk."

She paused.

"Listen!" she said presently. "They are coming. I hear them. Quick! Go and hide your horses, while I wipe out your tracks in the snow. And make no sound; do not move or say a word, whatever it is that you see. You can do nothing for Sergeant Silk—nothing—until the village has passed and the last dog and horse have gone out of sight."

Dan was turning away, when she detained him.

"Wait!" she said. "Give me the button."

He took it from his pocket and handed it to her, wondering what she intended to do with it. She put it between her lips, holding it by the brass loop at its back between her teeth for a moment or two. Then, dropping it into her hand, she drove her pony to and fro over the footmarks left by the two boys in the thin snow.

From far up the valley Dan could hear the sounds of travois poles being dragged along the ground, of the tramping of many horses' feet, the cracking of whips, the cries of children, the yelping of dogs. There could be no doubt that the Indians were approaching, and quickly. He urged Percy before him in among the trees. Hurriedly they gathered up their blankets, bundled them on the back of the pack-horse and led their horses far into the shadows of the pines where they tethered them, well hidden from the trail.

Returning, they took up a position between two boulders. Lying side by side at full length, and partly shielded by a clump of cactus, they could command an uninterrupted view of the whole valley. Down below them, hardly a score of yards away,

Maple Leaf had dismounted and now stood by her pony's head as if undecided what to do.

Nearer and nearer came the Indians.

"Here they come!" whispered Percy as their advance scouts appeared in sight.

Maple Leaf had led her pony to a patch of grass, where it was quietly feeding. Suddenly the girl turned as if in alarm. She gathered the bridle and prepared to mount, laying her two hands on the pony's back and neck. Then she drew back and led the animal towards a large stone.

Dan Medlicott, watching her closely, was surprised to see her walking as if she were lame. She did not attempt again to mount, but stood waiting for some moments. Then she seated herself on the stone.

The scouts had seen her, and at once they looked from side to side as though to assure themselves that she was alone. Apparently satisfied, they rode on, without quickening their pace. Behind them were about a dozen warriors in warpaint, and then some young braves. These were followed by many squaws, who could hardly be distinguished from the large bundles that they supported in front of them. Pack-horses and dogs drawing sledges straggled behind.

Maple Leaf stood up again as the scouts approached. One of them rode up to her and spoke to her. She answered him in his own tongue, which neither Dan nor Percy could have understood, even if they had heard. Then the scout brought his broncho to her side and stretched forth his hand and helped her to mount, she still pretending to be lame or ill.

She followed the scouts for a little distance and then drew rein and turned back, riding very slowly. Dan noticed now that she held Sergeant's Silk's button between her lips.

The warriors passed her without appearing to notice her. The young braves looked at her curiously, the squaws regarded her as an ordinary wayfarer, hardly turning their dark eyes in her direction. She touched her pony's flank with her heel, and it started forward at a quick walk towards the rear of the straggling procession.

"I don't see anything of Sergeant Silk," whispered Percy.

Dan nudged him warningly with an elbow. He moved outward an inch or two to get a fuller view of Maple Leaf.

He saw her cross to the farther side of the trail through a wide gap in the marching line. Then she wheeled round and rode very slowly with the train—so slowly that the pack-horses

and sledge-dogs passed her. But when she came abreast of the boulders behind which Dan and Percy were concealed, her manœuvres explained themselves. She was riding a few paces in advance of a party of six warriors, who carried rifles across their knees with their fingers on the triggers.

As she slowed down to let them pass her, she turned her head and looked at them searchingly. Dan saw that she still held the policeman's brass button between her teeth. Her pony suddenly shied, and the warriors looked at her, and it was then that Dan and Percy saw what they had been looking for all the time.

Behind the six warriors rode Sergeant Silk on an Indian mustang. His head had been bowed, but now he had raised it and was looking, without any betrayal of surprise, at the Indian girl with the brass button between her teeth. Did he recognise her ? If he did, he did not show it, and no slightest sign of recognition passed between them.

Maple Leaf, indeed, was not looking at him directly. Her gaze was upon the dark gap between the two boulders.

Very slowly, Sergeant Silk turned his glance in the same direction, while he drew himself very upright. It seemed almost that he was about to raise his hand to his fur cap in salute, but as he went by, followed by six more guardian warriors, Dan and Percy, looking down at him from their ambush, saw that his arms were tied behind his back with ropes.

He could not have seen the two boys. They were too well concealed even for the sharp eyes of Sergeant Silk to discover them. But the presence of Maple Leaf so near to him seemed to have given him a new hope.

Very truly had Maple Leaf said that nothing could be done. It would have needed the work of many daring men to rescue the prisoner from the hands of those savages.

Dan Medlicott drew back and dropped his head upon his folded arms in hopeless despair, knowing that the Indians were guarding their captive now, only because they intended to enjoy and gloat over their torture of him later on.

" Come, Dan," said Percy Rapson. " They've gone by. Let's get home to the ranch for help."

Dan raised himself to his elbows and looked out upon the whitened trail. The snow was falling more heavily than ever now.

" But where is Maple Leaf ? " he asked in alarm.

" She's gone along with the Indians," Percy answered. " That's what she has meant to do all the time. She's gone with them, to live with them, so that she can watch over Sergeant Silk."

CHAPTER XXIV

A DESPERATE SITUATION

It was enough for Maple Leaf that her instincts had led her on the right trail towards Lame Duck Coulee, and that she had found Sergeant Silk alive, although, unhappily, a bound and wounded captive. He had seen her. He had recognised her, and, seeing her there at the side of the trail, he would know without being told that she had come in search of him, and that his friends were trying to help him.

She was satisfied with what she had done so far. But she hoped to do more.

Even though it should cost her her life, she would do her best to prove her devotion to the man who had done so much for those whom she loved.

She could not doubt that Percy Rapson and Dan Medlicott had seen Sergeant Silk from their place of ambush as he rode past them, closely watched and guarded by the savages who surrounded him. This fact was of vital importance if Sergeant Silk were to be rescued from their clutches, for the two boys would now hasten back to Rattlesnake Ranch, and before very long they would bring willing volunteers to follow upon the unfortunate prisoner's track.

As for herself, now that she had discovered Sergeant Silk and understood his danger, she resolved to remain near him, to watch over him, and, if possible, to be of some personal assistance to him.

She did not look at him again, fearing to be discovered lingering within his sight; but allowed him and his warders to go past her, while she dropped behind and mingled with the stragglers at the rear of the long caravan—the veteran warriors and white-haired squaws, the boys and girls and the Indians on foot, who drove the heavily-loaded dogs and lumbering Red River carts laden with meat.

The girls looked at her curiously, evidently wondering where

she had come from, and why she had joined them. She was Indian, like themselves, but not of their village. She was a stranger; but she rode a well-fed broncho, wore a good blanket and dainty moccasins, and these material possessions which they coveted made her welcome.

She rode on in silence for a long time, keeping to the rear of the marching column and occasionally glancing ahead to where she could dimly make out the fur-coated figure of Sergeant Silk riding in the midst of the warriors who guarded him.

The early winter dusk deepened, and the snow continued to fall, covering the trail. The Indians were travelling north-eastward, and their scouts led them in among the mountains, winding through the valleys and gulches, keeping to the level ground to escape the steep places; now following along the banks of swollen streams, now passing through the gloom of pathless forests.

Maple Leaf realised that the farther they went the more securely did they seclude themselves from possible pursuers. She wondered if they intended to travel all through the night. They were plodding along so quickly and steadily that it seemed they wanted to reach some particular destination before making camp. More than once some of the braves rode back along the lines to urge the stragglers to close up their broken ranks.

With darkness there came signs that the village was drawing to a halt. They had entered a narrow defile enclosed between steep, precipitous walls, overgrown with birch and ash trees.

Instead of the long line of horses moving in single file, Maple Leaf could see that many of the Indians had dismounted and were crowded together. She could hear axes at work, cutting wood. There was the sound of a waterfall.

As she urged her pony forward, she saw the light of a torch, and in its reflection many of the braves moved about, carrying long poles which they stood up on end, bunching them together in the form of a pyramid, and presently enclosing them in their coverings of buffalo hide.

Even before she made her way into the crowd, many wigwams had been erected, and many lighted torches flared.

Most of the work of unloading the pack-horses and dog-sledges was done by the squaws, and Maple Leaf soon realised that she was likely to be conspicuous remaining on horseback while all the other women were on foot and busy.

She dismounted and led her pony past the front of the great medicine lodge, in which a fire had already been kindled. She

crossed the open space as if with the purpose of taking the broncho to the back of the encampment where the Indians' horses were being hobbled for the night. But her real reason for going this way was that, at the entrance of the lodge, and within the area of light from the flaming logs, she had seen Sergeant Silk standing between two tall young braves, who were stationed on guard over him.

Maple Leaf wondered if either of those two Indians could understand English. It was not probable that they could; it was hardly even possible. In her desperation she resolved to take the chance of speaking to their prisoner, if by any device she could contrive to attract his attention as she passed.

At present, he appeared to be totally blind and deaf to his surroundings—to have abandoned himself to every cruelty that his savage and merciless captors might inflict upon him. He stood, looking exceedingly forlorn and weary and hopeless, with his chin sunk into the collar of his fur coat, his hands tied behind his back, his shoulders held slack, his knees bent. Maple Leaf did not know that he had had no sleep for over sixty hours; that there was a bullet wound in his right arm; that he had been lamed by the fall from his horse, but it was obvious that he was ill and utterly despondent. She wanted to assure him that he was not forgotten.

How could she make him know that she was near?

She went slowly forward. When she got opposite to him, she gave a very sudden pull to her pony's bridle rein, and the pony jibbed. At the same moment Maple Leaf allowed her blanket to fall from her shoulders to the ground. She drew the pony round with an apparent effort, and, stooping to pick up the blanket, she raised her eyes for an instant towards Sergeant Silk, and saw that he had lifted his head and was looking at her with alert recognition.

"Be patient, Sergeant," she said, as if she were speaking to the restless pony. "The boys are coming. Quiet! Quiet! Do you understand?"

Sergeant Silk coughed.

"Exactly," he answered, as though speaking to himself.

Then Maple Leaf, gathering her blanket over her arm to hide the revolver in her belt, gave another violent tug to the bridle, and as her pony obediently jibbed once again, she began angrily to scold it, speaking volubly in Sarcee, as if that were the language which the animal was accustomed to hear from her.

The two Indians had observed nothing suspicious, and Maple

Leaf passed on into the darkness beyond the medicine lodge and round to the back of the smaller lodge of one of the chiefs. She was listening to all the sounds that came to her, and watching all that went on around her.

She did not know where she should go or what she should do. She was leaving everything to chance. She did not wish to part from her pony by sending it adrift among the horses of the Indians. She might never find it again. Nor did she want to go far away from Sergeant Silk, lest some evil should happen to him, or in case he should be taken unseen by her into one of the wigwams.

So she led her broncho round about the lodges, pretending to be very busy. She found that she could go among the braves and squaws without exciting any marked suspicion. No one questioned her, although many glanced at her furtively, wonderingly, and, perhaps, also admiringly, for her tall, erect figure, her grace of movement, and her richer clothing, distinguished her from the careless, untidy and often very ugly women of the camp.

It was not until afterwards that she learnt that on the previous day Bear's Paw had been joined by a party of Crees from the Lake Minnewanka Reservation, and that while these newcomers might believe that she was one of the squaws from Lame Duck Coulee, Bear's Paw's people might equally well mistake her for one of the Crees.

The smoke-blackened wigwams were now all pitched, a fire had been lighted in each of them, for warmth, and at larger fires in the open the squaws were cooking meat, brewing tea, or making meal cakes and dough-nuts. The snow had now ceased falling, and there was a frosty starlight sky overhead.

In her aimless wanderings Maple Leaf came unexpectedly upon a young Sarcee woman who had spoken with her at the beginning of the march. The girl had told her that her name was Golden Feather.

Golden Feather stood now beside one of the fires ladling tea from an immense cauldron, and she offered Maple Leaf a pipkin full of the steaming liquid, adding some black sugar, which she took from a sack with her grimy fingers.

"Drink," she said.

Maple Leaf raised the pipkin to her lips, but lowered it again, thinking of Sergeant Silk.

"It is too hot," she said.

She gave a sharp twitch to her pony's bridle and the pony

moved away, pulling strongly. Maple Leaf followed willingly, still carrying the pipkin of tea. Then, as she got into the shadows behind Golden Feather's teepee, she led the pony in the direction of the medicine lodge, finding her way to it with unerring instinct.

Sergeant Silk had now sunk exhausted to the snowy ground. He seemed to be unconscious. A wrinkled-faced medicine man was standing over him, while one of the young braves, kneeling at the soldier-policeman's side, was unfastening the knots in the hide rope that bound his arms behind his back.

Even when his arms were liberated he did not move them. Perhaps they were numbed by the cold and by the strain of the rope upon them. He moaned as if in pain.

Maple Leaf was almost on the point of running up to him; but she restrained her eagerness, while she stood in the shadow watching. The two braves raised him to a sitting position, and he stared forth in a dazed way. His handsome face looked very pale and haggard in the light of the fire. She saw a shudder run through him. He raised his left hand now and loosened the collar of his scarlet tunic.

Dropping her bridle, and not caring what became of her pony, she strode boldly towards him, carrying the pipkin of tea, as if she were going to pass him. But as she came nearer she glanced aside at him and stopped, and spoke to one of the braves with the compassionate interest which any woman, whether white or red, would naturally show concerning a man who was suffering.

"The Paleface is ill, then?" she said. "Or, perhaps, he is only cold and hungry? Let him drink of this tea." She went nearer. "It is good," she added.

She expected to be sent away, but none of the three Indians attempted to prevent her when she went closer still, and, kneeling, put her left hand to the back of the sergeant's head and held the pipkin to his lips.

"Drink, Paleface," she said, still speaking in the tongue of the Redskins. "Are you a weak woman that you grow faint because of the cold, because of a sprinkle of snow? Wough! Where is the bravery of which your white-skinned brothers are always boasting? Drink!"

He raised his eyes to hers as he drank.

"Thank you, Maple Leaf," he murmured, withdrawing his lips for a moment. "This will do me all the good in the world. Be careful of yourself. You're running a terrible risk, being here."

Maple Leaf tenderly stroked the back of his neck as she looked up in seeming perplexity at the wrinkled-faced medicine man.

"What says the Paleface?" she asked blankly.

The old Indian shook his head, and the two braves betrayed that they were equally ignorant of English.

By action, since she did not dare to speak to him, she urged the sergeant to finish the tea.

"They're figuring to burn me at the stake to-night," he told her in such a tone that he might have been merely objecting that the tea was too sweet. "You must not interfere. You can do nothing. Understand?"

She caught her breath, and, pretending to stumble as she rose to her feet, contrived to thrust her loaded revolver between his knees. Then, without looking round at him, she strode away in search of her pony.

She found it where she had left it, waiting for her patiently. She led it back into the light of the fire where she had last seen Golden Feather; but Golden Feather was no longer there, and she went on with the intention of hobbling her broncho and letting it mingle with the Indian ponies. But as she passed one of the squaw's wigwams, the girl she had been seeking came out and invited her within, telling her to allow the pony to stray.

In her agitation over what Sergeant Silk had just told her, Maple Leaf meekly obeyed. They offered her food, and she tried to eat it; but it was so different from the wholesome food to which she had been accustomed at Rattlesnake Ranch that she much preferred hunger.

Golden Feather was particularly attentive to her, but her solicitude was presently explained when she appropriated Maple Leaf's blanket and showed a desire to take also her beautiful beaded moccasins. Had Maple Leaf retained her revolver it would surely have been discovered by the inquisitive squaws, for there was hardly a single one of her possessions which was not handled and examined and openly coveted.

She wanted to escape from the teepee, but there was nowhere that she could go. She knew that she could give no immediate help to Sergeant Silk. He had forbidden her to interfere. And whilst there was danger of her being molested by the Indians as a spy of their white enemies, she was safer here among the squaws than outside.

Yet in spite of herself, in spite of the sergeant's expressed belief that she could do nothing, she found herself watching for an opportunity to disobey him and to go boldly out in the faint hope of being able, by some chance, to help him.

His situation, it was true, was very desperate. Even with the

loaded revolver which she had secretly given him he could not defend himself for more than a very few minutes against the scores of merciless savages who now surrounded him.

He could not escape by running, for he was lame. If she could have given him her pony and bidden him ride off for life and liberty, he could not hope to break through the pickets of scouts posted at either end of the defile. And would he consent to go, leaving her, Maple Leaf, alone among the Indians ?

Reclining on a rough blanket near the fire she considered all the difficulties and dangers. But her chief and most terrible fear was that the Indians would carry out their resolve to burn their prisoner at the stake.

Sergeant Silk had told her that this was their intention, and she could not for an instant doubt the truth of what he had said.

She knew that for years past the Indians had ceased to torture their prisoners, and that their cruelties had been suppressed under British rule. But these Crees and Sarcees, who had thrown in their lot with the half-breeds, had already broken out into open rebellion against their white rulers ; they were in revolt against the North-West Mounted Police and all other representatives of British law, and, reverting to their old life of freedom and savagery, they were not likely now to shrink from the fearful joy of putting their victim to the torture.

" They're figuring to burn me at the stake to-night," Sergeant Silk had calmly said, and the terrible words repeated themselves again and again in the brain of the girl who had come to help him.

Was it true that she could do nothing—nothing ?

She thought of the fable of the lion and the mouse, which she had often read in one of Joan Medlicott's books at the ranch ; but fancying herself in the position of the mouse, she failed to discover any net that she might nibble.

She had already done all that seemed to her possible, and she had failed to liberate her lion. She had sent Dan and Percy home for help, but the trail which they were to have followed was now covered inches deep under the snow, and there was no faintest hope that they could come in time to find Sergeant Silk alive.

" You can do nothing," he had told her.

" No," she admitted sorrowfully to herself now as she stared into the fire, " I can do nothing."

CHAPTER XXV

THE LION AND THE MOUSE

Maple Leaf's eyes grew heavy with the painful nip of wood-smoke as she lay in the warmth, thinking, thinking.

The door-flap of the wigwam had been closed, and in the darkness she could see nothing but the red glow of the fire through the reek, and occasionally the ugly faces of the squaws when a flame flickered up from the embers.

One by one the women ceased their noisy chattering and curled themselves in bundles under their smoke-grimed blankets. At length there were but two of them awake—two grey-haired crones, who were sharing the enjoyment of a very black clay pipe. Their strong tobacco, mixed with tea-leaves, mingled with the pungent smoke from the fire made the air stifling.

Maple Leaf could not have slept if she had wished. Her brain was too excited, and there were disturbing sounds from outside. It seemed to her that the Indians were making preparations for the torturing of their prisoner. She heard the beating of a drum and the monotonous chanting voices of men who seemed to be dancing. Presently a second drum joined the first, and the voices grew louder and more weirdly barbarous.

Through a gaping seam in the skin cover of the wigwam she could see a glow of yellow firelight. She raised herself to bring her eyes upon a level with the seam, but she could distinguish nothing but a cluster of poles projecting from the top of a neighbouring teepee.

She listened to every sound. Suddenly there was a pause in the beating of the drums; dogs barked on the outskirts of the village, and with their barking there came to her from afar the tramping of many horses' hoofs muffled by the snow.

"Ough!" grunted one of the old squaws who had been listening also. "It is the braves returning from their horse raid at the ranch of the Rattlesnake! They have been long on the trail."

The old woman rose slowly and awkwardly to her feet, and,

wrapping her blanket about her, went mutteringly to the door-flap and turned it aside to peer outward into the light of the camp-fires. Her companion, more excited, moved around, wakening the sleeping squaws, announcing to them that their chief, Bear's Paw, had returned with his warriors, bringing many captured ponies.

Before they had scrambled out of their blankets, Maple Leaf had slipped silently to the curtain, and, pushing it aside as the old woman had done, went out into the cold night.

She remembered exactly how she had come away from the medicine lodge, and now she hastened back to it by the windward side of a long row of wigwams, keeping always in the shadows.

She had not gone far when she was startled by the appearance of a dark, moving form that emerged from between two of the teepees. She shrank back, fearing to be discovered wandering alone like a spy.

Great was her relief when she saw that it was only a riderless horse, and her relief was the more intense when she recognised her own pony.

She caught at the coil of rope on the saddle horn and quickly hobbled him by tying an end of the rope round his fore legs. There she left him, and went on her way towards the open space in front of the medicine lodge.

This centre of the encampment, which was like a small market square, was now thronged with Indians—warriors, braves, squaws, and youths—gathered in a wide ring around the large fire, wailing dismally. Most of the men had painted their faces black, in token of mourning for their fellow-tribesmen who had fallen victims to the guns of their paleface enemies in the unsuccessful raid on Rattlesnake Ranch, and many of them wore hideous masks surmounted with buffalo horns.

Maple Leaf gathered that the party, pursued by the Mounted Police and cowboys from the corrals, had sent scouts in advance to inform their friends of their defeat and disappointment. The scouts had come in some hours ago, and now the main body of the raiders were themselves riding into the defile, where it had been appointed that they should join their people. Some of them had already arrived among the wigwams and were dismounting.

They were not all of them Indians. Many of them were half-breeds, and among these latter Maple Leaf recognised some who were from Hilton's Jump, the half-breed village near Rattlesnake Ranch.

Here was a new peril. If she should be seen by them, they would guess that she had found her way into the camp for some purpose opposed to their own interest, and when they should discover that Sergeant Silk was a prisoner, they would quickly connect her presence with this circumstance and regard her as a dangerous spy of the Mounted Police.

"You are running a terrible risk in being here," Sergeant Silk had told her, and she understood now how much wisdom there was in his warning.

She was moving away out of possible sight of the half-breeds, when the chief, Bear's Paw, rode through a gap made for him in the encircling crowd. She stood near to him as he dismounted. Two of the medicine men went up to him, and she heard one of them telling him of their prisoner. He spoke of Silk as "The red-coat who never goes wrong."

Bear's Paw nodded with satisfaction.

"It is good medicine that he is caught," he said. "But he is cunning. The mountain fox is not more cunning. The warriors must see to it that he does not escape."

"Bear's Paw is rich in wisdom," returned the other. "The red-coat shall not escape. There is one way to prevent it. Let him be burnt at the stake until there is nothing left of him but his buttons with their sign of the buffalo's head."

"So it shall be," decided the chief. "I have said."

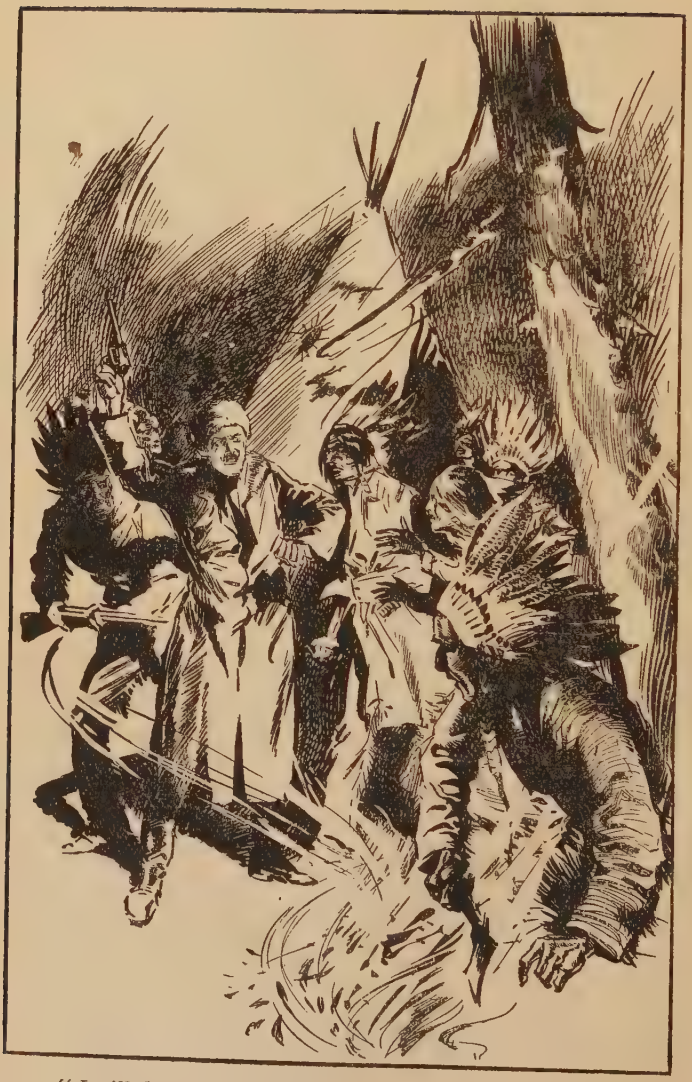
When he had gone into his lodge the beating of the drums was resumed more loudly than before, accompanied by yells and moans and weird chantings, while the men with masks continued to dance, each independently of the rest, without plan or obvious design.

Maple Leaf had shuddered when she heard the chief's verdict. She looked about searchingly, but could see nothing of Sergeant Silk. She knew enough of the customs of the Indians, however, to be sure that so important an event as the torturing of a captive would take place publicly, in sight of the whole village, and she believed that the Red River cart, which had been brought into the open space in front of the medicine lodge, had something to do with the preparations.

And, indeed, this was so, as she presently discovered.

The warriors and braves who had returned with their chief disappeared into their lodges, and while their horses were led away, the squaws busied themselves providing food for their hungry and, doubtless, weary husbands.

The mourning dance was continued for a time, and there was



"I will cheat you of your enjoyment yet," cried Sergeant Silk.

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much wailing and shouting among those whose immediate relatives had failed to return. Some few of the Redskins even reverted to the old custom of wounding themselves with knives in token of their woe.

Maple Leaf was thankful that her girlhood had been spent amongst civilised and Christian people. The sight of such savagery as was revealed to her now was revolting. She turned away from it and resumed her search for Sergeant Silk.

Some braves passed her, carrying timber. They were followed by others, who were half pushing, half dragging, something else, which she did not see until a stifled moan of pain attracted her gaze.

She turned with a start. It was Sergeant Silk whom they were dragging forth, and one of them had seized him by the wrist of his wounded right arm. He struggled, wrenched himself free, and, standing boldly confronting them, drew Maple Leaf's revolver from his belt.

"I will cheat you of your enjoyment yet," he cried in a clear ringing voice, as he limped awkwardly back a step.

The Indians shrank from him, evidently believing that he was about to use his weapon upon them. But Maple Leaf understood the ways of the white man better than they did. More than once this night she had recalled to herself what she had once heard this same soldier-policeman say to Dan Medlicott in the kitchen at Rattlesnake Ranch.

"No man need be tortured by Redskins if he has had the sense to keep one last bullet for himself," he had said. "When it comes to the pinch, he can always cheat them by putting that bullet into his own head."

And this, she saw, was what he contemplated doing now.

She leapt forward.

"Stop!" she cried.

He saw her and lowered his hand, fixing his eyes upon her strangely.

"Say, were you figuring to take your own life?" she asked.

"Cert'nly," came his decisive reply. "But I didn't know that you were near, watching."

"Give me back my pistol," she demanded, holding forth her hand. "They've seen it. They'll sure take it from you."

He held it towards her, and she took it. And the Indians, wholly mistaking her action, regarded her in astonishment, doubtless believing that it was on their behalf that she had interposed, and that by disarming their rebellious victim she had saved their lives.

Silk did not resist them now, and they seized him and urged him forward into the open space where the great camp-fire shed its bright light around upon the expectant crowd, and where the Red River cart had been tilted up, with a spar lashed across the shafts, to which he was to be bound.

Maple Leaf followed them, watching. She had hidden the revolver in her belt under her leather jacket. Her heart was beating wildly.

Never before in her young life had she known what it was to be nervous. But never before had she been in such a terrible situation. She was trying to realise her duty, and that duty was the most awful, surely, that any human being could face.

She despaired of saving Sergeant Silk's life. How could she hope to save it ? But at the least she could save him from the fearful torture that awaited him, as she would wish to be saved herself were she doomed to the same ordeal.

She had come to her resolve. When at last she should see him bound to the stake, with the jeering, exultant savages torturing him with their knives, and the cruel flames rising about his feet—when she should see his brave, handsome features twitching and contracting with the pain that he was beginning to endure—then she would end his misery. She would take out her weapon—she would aim very straight. One pull at the trigger, and all would be over.

This was her duty as she conceived it. And when she had fulfilled it, the savages might punish her as they liked. She did not consider her own safety. She had resolved that if she could only save Sergeant Silk from one moment's torture, she would willingly sacrifice her own life.

She saw them taking him to the cart and bringing forth the ropes with which to bind him. He betrayed no fear. He even seemed to be more than usually cool as he watched the two braves, who were laying the light twigs and heavier logs about his feet. Maple Leaf could almost fancy that he was criticising their method of building a fire, giving them advice. They had removed his fur overcoat, his tunic, his neck handkerchief, and belt, and he stood bareheaded, with his shirt open at the throat and his muscular arms folded across his chest. She could not see whether he still wore his boots.

There was a pause in their preparations. It was a part of their enjoyment to torture him with long suspense. The chief and his warriors had not yet come upon the scene, and Maple Leaf knew that such a ceremony would attract all the village as spectators.

She drew back into the fringe of the circle of expectant braves and squaws, but was careful to secure for herself an uninterrupted view of the victim, so that when the moment for action should come, she might perform the duty which she had imposed upon herself.

A hand gripped her arm. She started violently.

"So? It is Mam'selle Maple Leaf that I see here? Hein? This is much interesting."

She stared with wide open eyes at the man beside her.

"Jules!" she exclaimed.

"And why not?" returned the half-breed. "You suppose I stay tend de bar Hilton's Jump when de saloon is empty of de patrons?" He still gripped her arm. "Say," he went on, "you come straight from Rattlesnake Ranch, eh? Ah, bah, dey give us ver' 'ot tam there, no meestek. What?"

"Listen—quick!" cried Maple Leaf, freeing herself. "You see what the Indians are doing?"

"But yes," smiled Jules. "He ees Mounted Policeman. Soon you see de flame curl roun' and roun' heem, ver' nice, eh?"

Maple Leaf caught at his arm and thrust her face near to his ear.

"Don't you see who it is?" she cried in desperate appeal. "It's Sergeant Silk—the man who nursed you through the fever, who saved your life and the lives of your three little children at Hilton's Jump. You tried to injure him once; but you must help him now. Quick! Go! You must save his life, as he saved yours. You owe it to him. Oh, why don't you go?"

"Sergeant Silk?" Jules was bending forward, peering searchingly across the firelight to the face that looked so white among the dark faces of the Indians. "True, true!" he cried. "It is he! But it is too late, *voilà!* Dey commence for mek de fire. It is not possible I save heem."

"Listen!" Maple Leaf panted eagerly. "There, look!" she pointed to the medicine lodge. "There is Gabriel Dumont, the leader of your stupid rebellion, coming out of the lodge with Bear's Paw. You are one of his interpreters. You have influence with him. Go to him—now! Do you hear? Go to him and tell that this thing must not be. Tell him that the white men will wipe out every Indian in Canada if they hurt a hair of Sergeant Silk's head! Go!"

She pushed him forward; but he drew back.

"Yes," he demurred. "Yes, I un'erstan' absolutely. But we 'ave no occasion for mek so much hurry. *Attendez*, let me to think."

The drums were already beating. Some of the Indians were gathering about their victim, menacingly flourishing their knives and spears. From the pile of twigs and timber at his feet there rose a thin film of white smoke.

Maple Leaf flung Jules aside.

"Coward!" she cried. And she moved away, stealthily advancing nearer to the savages, who were beginning to dance the barbaric scalp dance round the fire.

But as she glanced aside for an instant she saw Jules running across the open space. She stopped and watched him go up to the rebel chief and speak to him, gesticulating wildly. Then he turned to Bear's Paw, seeming to be repeating his plea for mercy towards the doomed man.

Gabriel Dumont was looking across at Sergeant Silk, as if now for the first time he realised what was taking place. There was a look of horror in his face. He turned to the half-breeds who were in attendance, spoke to them excitedly, and then went to the Indian chief, obviously urging him to put a stop to the torture.

Maple Leaf's eyes were fixed upon the Indian. She knew that from him alone could come the command that the cruelty should cease. She saw him shake his head, and with a cry she glanced back at Sergeant Silk.

A spear flashed past his cheek and buried its point in the baulk of timber behind him. The twigs had broken into flame about his feet. His eyes were closed, his lips were moving. Another spear grazed his shoulder. Then he raised his drooping head and looked straight towards her, as if, knowing her intended purpose, he were warning her to be ready.

She gripped her revolver and waited. He was still uninjured, although the flames were creeping to his knees. So intently did she watch him that she was not aware that the Indian chief had approached; but suddenly she started at the sound of his commanding voice rising high above the clamour.

"Warriors, brothers," he cried, holding up his right hand. "This is not to be. My medicine tells me that it is not wise to torture a brave man as our fathers tortured their paleface victims in the old days. Our prisoner must not be harmed. He must be set free. Warriors, this is my wish. I am your chief. Obey me. I have spoken."

Maple Leaf's revolver fell with a dull thud to the snowy ground at her feet.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE BLAZED TRAIL

"It's all very well for you to talk," said Percy Rapson, pausing in his work of driving an iron tent-peg into the hard, frozen ground, "but what are we here for, in any case? That's what I want to know. Seems to me we're on a wild-goose chase. We're not explorers. We don't want to discover the North Pole; and yet we're going on and on, day after day, never getting any nearer to what we're supposed to be searching for. I shouldn't care so much if we could only see our goal; but, if you ask me, I'd a jolly sight sooner be comfortably at home in Rattlesnake Ranch."

Dan Medlicott was on his knees packing snow into the camp-kettles with his thickly mittened hands.

"So would we all," he looked up to say. "But we can't be more than half a day's march behind them now. The tracks that we struck to-day weren't certainly more'n six hours old. And, of course, we should have turned back long ago if we hadn't been kind of sure that Silk and Maple Leaf are still alive, expectin' us to rescue them."

"That's where I don't agree with you," rejoined Percy. "It's next to impossible that they could expect us. They don't know—they can't know—that we're still on their trail, we being behind them all the time. If they knew, don't you think they'd drop some sort of message for us? Sergeant Silk can't have exhausted all his regimental buttons, since, so far as we know, he hasn't dropped more than the one that Maple Leaf found that day."

Dan stood up, dusting the dry snow from his knees.

"Perhaps the Indians don't give him a chance," he suggested. "They may have stolen his uniform, buttons and all. He may be kept with his hands tied behind his back. There's heaps of things that might prevent him from blazing the trail. But you may bet your socks he hasn't given up hope, and that he knows some-

how that we're tryin' to help him. You see, Maple Leaf is bound to have let him understand that we know where he is. Say, I've got a heap of faith in Maple Leaf."

"So have I," returned Percy. "I have so much faith in her that I'm beginning to believe that she has already managed to get Sergeant Silk out of the Indians' clutches. I shouldn't be a bit surprised to find that they've both escaped, days ago. In that case, we're only wasting our time following the village any longer. I say——" he broke off, then added anxiously: "Have a look at my nose, Dan. It isn't frost-bitten, is it? It feels rather queer."

"Looks all right," Dan assured him. "Rub it with snow, to make sure; and keep away from the fire. But it isn't quite cold enough for frost-bite, I should think. We haven't got much below zero, yet."

Their camp consisted of themselves and seven companions, including Rippling Water, Antoine, The Moose That Walks, and a young constable of the North-West Mounted Police, who was in command of the search expedition. They were all well mounted and provided with sleighs loaded with provisions and camp necessaries. There had been others of the Mounted Police in the neighbourhood of Rattlesnake Ranch when Percy and Dan had returned, but they had received official orders to proceed without delay to the South Saskatchewan, where the rebels were concentrating, and they had left Constable Glaister behind to take up the search for Sergeant Silk.

Helped by the information supplied by Percy and Dan, Glaister had taken with him as many volunteers from the ranch as he could muster, and had set off in pursuit of Bear's Paw and his migrating village.

The trail from Lame Duck Coulee had been covered by the newly-fallen snow, but the direction in which the Indians were travelling was known, and after a two days' anxious search the ashes of their camp-fires were discovered in Arrow Head Gulch.

This was the gloomy defile among the mountains in which the Redskins had pitched their teepees on that first night when their captive had gone through the ordeal of being bound to the stake, and to endure the torture which Maple Leaf had interrupted.

Searching in the trodden snow, Antoine and Rippling Water had come upon the track of a man's boots among the prints of many moccasined feet, and as the left boot-mark in each case indicated that the wearer of the boots had walked with a limp, it

was decided that Sergeant Silk was still secure from serious injury. No sign of Maple Leaf, however, could be discovered.

The trail in the snow was now easy to follow, and although the Indians had two days' start, yet they were encumbered by their equipment, and their slow-going Red River carts and dog-sleighs, and the distance between them and their pursuers was quickly lessened.

"We ought to locate them some time to-morrow," said Constable Glaister, when, after supper, the company sat huddled in their furs round the bivouac fire. "And then, supposing we find out that the sergeant and the girl are still with them, we can make a slant across the mountains and fetch help from Battleford."

"Yes," nodded Percy Rapson. "But how do you propose finding out whether Silk is with them or not?"

Glaister shrugged his shoulders.

"That's just what puzzles me," he answered. "Send out scouts, I suppose," he added, glancing across at Antoine and then at the Moose. "It can only be done by cunning."

"Wough!" grunted the Indian, pulling at his pipe. "To-morrow too late. To-night heap better. No too much far."

His companions all turned inquiring glances upon him.

"Say, do you smell them anyways near, Moose?" questioned Dan Medlicott. "The wind's the other way. I guess the Indians are more likely to smell us. What makes you say to-night's better than to-morrow?"

For answer the Moose pointed outward into the darkness with the stem of his pipe.

"See!" he said.

Rippling Water and Antoine stood up, walked away from the firelight, and stood staring in the direction which the Indian had indicated. They both sniffed the cold, wintry air.

"You fader he mek beeg meestek dees tam," muttered Antoine.

"He doesn't often make mistakes," said Rip. "Say, is that a drift of mist rising over the shoulder of the hill there?" He pointed. "Looks like smoke."

"Smok'?" repeated the half-breed incredulously. Then he discovered what Rip had seen. "But yes," he reluctantly admitted. "Eet ees smok,' certainly. I t'ink you look more far away. Some pauvre trappair he mek leetle fire, keep heemself warm, keep away de wolf."

"But that is not such a very little fire," objected Rip. "Must

be a fairly big one to send its smoke up from the valley high as the top of that hill. Besides," he added, "there's more than one fire."

He looked back at Constable Glaister.

"My father is right," he said. "Bear's Paw has made camp at the far side of the hill yonder in Red Willow Cañon. We're so near to him that——" He paused. "Hadn't we better cover our fire, sir?" he suggested. "Their scouts will sure see it. We shall be discovered."

As a matter of fact they had already been discovered.

. . . . . .

Earlier on that same day, when Bear's Paw and his long train of followers were coming towards the end of their day's march, and their scouts had gone in advance to look for a suitable camping-ground, Maple Leaf contrived to bring her pony side by side with the lumbering Red River cart in which Sergeant Silk was riding.

The sergeant was no longer bound with ropes, but he was a closely watched prisoner. His captors had realised that, as he was suffering from a sprained ankle, there was no possibility of his running away.

He was practically helpless in their hands. He had no weapon, and could not defend himself. He had no horse, and, even if he had one, it would have been impossible for him to escape and live alone in those desolate mountain wilds without food.

It was not necessary to guard him; he was wholly dependent upon them, and so it happened that when Maple Leaf, awaiting her opportunity, went to the side of the cart, there was no one near excepting the Indian who was driving, and who could not understand the language of the Paleface.

"I am here, Sergeant," she announced, as if speaking to her pony.

"Good!" he answered her without turning. "Any news?"

"Yes," she responded after a long pause. "An hour ago, when I was at the back, I lingered behind to round up the dogs. I was not noticed. The squaws treat me as their sister, as one of themselves, you understand. I can do many things. They never suspect."

"Exactly," came the sergeant's hollow voice from within the cart. "But you can do nothing. Well?"

"I listened," Maple Leaf went on. "For a long time I listened. There were no scouts in the rear. They had gone on to

find a camping-ground. As I listened I heard from afar something which told me that our friends are on our trail. Sound travels far across the snow. The sound that I heard was very far away. It was the crack of a whip. Dan Medlicott is clever at cracking a bull whip. He makes it sound like a gun-shot. He cracks it too often. It is dangerous. If the scouts were to hear it, they would ride back to see who were following on our trail."

"Exactly. It is not wise," agreed Silk. "When you are tracking a band of Indians, you should be very silent. Well?"

Maple Leaf did not answer him for a long time. She rode her pony forward, spoke to one of the squaws about her papoose, who was crying, and then dropped behind again to the side of the cart.

"To-night," she continued, "you will not see me when you are being led into the wigwam that is your prison. I shall not bring you the cup of tea as before. I shall not dress your wounded arm. I shall be far away. But I will come back."

Sergeant Silk moved uneasily and turned to look down at her.

"You will be running a great risk," he cautioned her. "You have already done too much for me. I can never repay you."

"My life is yours, Sergeant," she said very softly. "And you have said that I am cunning. Do you trust me?"

"Why, cert'nly. You will take your gun—your loaded revolver? And your blanket? It is very cold. The wind is rising. If snow should fall you may lose your way. I think you had better not go."

"I am going," she responded.

"Well," he said presently. "I cannot keep you. You are very obstinate. But do not come back. If you find our friends, you must remain with them. Go from me now. They will suspect you if they see you talking with me. Good-bye, Maple Leaf."

"Good-bye, Sergeant."

Later in the afternoon, when the village came to a halt in Red Willow Cañon, when the wigwams had been set up with their door-flaps to the leeward, and the storm-caps covering the smoke-vents, when Sergeant Silk was being led from the cart to one of the teepees, he again saw Maple Leaf.

She wore her blanket over her head, almost concealing her face, and she carried a milk-pail under her arm, and a three-legged milking-stool in her hand. But for her more graceful way of walking, she might have been one of the squaws going about her usual domestic occupations.

Walking slowly and with apparent carelessness through the lane of wigwams, she made her way to the outskirts of the village where the ponies were ranging, and the oxen and dogs were resting after their long day's journey over the snow. Some of the younger squaws were already engaged with the milch cows, but they paid no heed to Maple Leaf.

She went up to one of the cows. It was a fawn-coloured Jersey, which bore upon its side the brand of Rattlesnake Ranch. It had been stolen many months before, and Maple Leaf had often milked it. She walked straight up to it and began to talk to it crooningly, stroking its velvet nose. Then she sat down with the stool and pail and began to milk.

The Jersey had always been quiet, but now something seemed to be wrong. The squaws, looking on, saw the animal kick over the pail and run a short distance away, before being brought to a standstill by the entreaties of Maple Leaf, who again set down her stool and pail. But again the still empty pail was kicked over, and the cow ran off even farther than before, with Maple Leaf in pursuit. Once more the cow halted and waited, and again the stool and pail were upset. A young brave, who was on picket duty, came up and offered his help. But Maple Leaf declared that she was determined to master the brute, if she had to follow her about all night. Then she sat down once more and again slily pinched the animal, which raced off, always in the same direction.

In this way, by short and easy flights, and all under the eyes of the squaws and the unsuspecting scouts, the cow and the milkmaid reached the turn of the cañon, where they were hidden from the village by the willow trees and a projecting cliff.

Maple Leaf leapt to her feet. Flinging pail and stool aside, she darted into the deepest gloom of the trees, where the ground was clear of snow, running, running, and always keeping within the darkest shadows until she had passed through the outer ring of the pickets and had come to the opening of the cañon.

Dusk had already fallen into dark night, but she pressed on and on. Down into deep gullies she passed, and up their steep sides again, over rocks, through morasses and cold spring swamps, across rapid streams on the trunks of fallen trees, keeping always near the beaten trail, but taking advantage of every bare stretch of ground where her moccasined feet would leave no betraying track; always keeping an anxious look-out in front of her for signs of friend or foe.

Her fear of leaving a track was lessened when she noticed that

the wind was rising, sweeping the dry snow into wreaths across the trail, driving it into the hollows. Her own footprints would be covered before daylight, and there was small danger of her being pursued now that she was many miles away from the encampment.

The sky was clear, and she took the guidance of the stars, knowing her direction. Sometimes she seemed to be going astray, but she had observed the landmarks, and she was soon reassured by the sight of a remembered hill or stream.

The wind was bitterly cold, and she was hungry ; but she was young and strong, and she never faltered. Only once was she afraid. But the cause of her fear was enough to make even the strongest man tremble.

In the early forenoon the migrating Indians had passed through a great pine forest, where there was no beaten path.

The scouts had gone in advance, blazing the trees as they went. In the daylight it was easy enough to follow their trail by the cuts of their tomahawks on the bark ; but in the deep darkness of night, and when travelling in the opposite direction, it was almost impossible to discover the marks on the trees, and the soft, springy carpet of pine-needles which had been sheltered from the falling snow bore very few traces of the Indians, who had passed only a few hours before. The carts had not followed closely upon the track of the scouts, but had gone by roundabout ways, keeping to the level ground and taking many twists and turns to avoid the closely growing trees. Maple Leaf had anticipated the difficulty of making her way through the forest, and before entering she had very carefully taken her bearings by the stars, hoping to keep to her direction by the sky seen through the gaps made by fallen trees.

But the gloom was so intense when she penetrated the woodland that many times she stood still, hesitating which way to go, looking in vain for a glimpse of the sky through the darkly spreading branches that were heavily laden with snow. The wind moaned dismally in the tree-tops, swaying them to and fro and sending down whirling showers of dislodged snow, and once a great avalanche of it fell heavily upon her head, startling her with its suddenness and staggering her with its weight.

She could only guess at her direction and plod on and on, but when at length she came to an opening and gazed upward to the sky, she saw the stars in the same relative position as before, and knew that she had not yet gone astray. As she went on she realised that the wind was rising into fierceness. The trees

swayed and creaked violently, and their weird moaning was like the voices of souls in torment, swelling sometimes into wild shrieks.

It was strange that she should have chosen this night above all others on which to make her lonely quest. She almost wished to turn back to the refuge of the Indian village in the sheltered cañon. But she had faith that at the end of the forest and over the hill beyond she must surely find the camp of the friends who had come along the trail to the aid of Sergeant Silk ; and when she thought of Sergeant Silk in his great need she went onward with a lighter heart and a fuller determination, braving all perils, overcoming all obstacles.

She was naturally courageous. The darkness and the forest solitudes had no power to awe her. It was only the very real danger from falling branches that daunted her a little. In the wilder gusts of the tempest she could hear the splitting of timber, sounding like gun-shots. High above, the snow was now flying in a swirling mist that obscured the sky and shut out the friendly stars, while below, where she walked, bending to meet the blast, the darkness had become so dense that she could only faintly discern the tree-trunks in the surrounding gloom.

Once she struck her head against a down-bent branch, and the blow made her brain whirl so that she almost fell. She put forth her hand to steady herself against the trunk of the stout pine she was passing, but drew it back with a startled cry.

Instead of the tree, she had touched something warm and shaggy, that moved swiftly across her path and darted away with a yelp, as much alarmed as herself. She saw its dark shape stop abruptly, and two luminous eyes were turned upon her for a moment, looking like blinking stars.

With a passing shudder of cold rather than of fear, Maple Leaf went on unheeding, knowing that one coyote alone would not attack her. But presently she was aware that the animal was following her. In a lull of the wind she could hear its panting breath ; she could feel the soft padding of its feet on the turf.

She stopped and looked round. The coyote stopped also. She could see it in the darkness outlined against a patch of snow, sitting on its haunches, with its long tongue lolling and quivering from an open mouth, its fangs showing white, its eyes vividly gleaming. It lifted its head and gave forth a long, tremulous howl that echoed among the trees :

" Ya-oo, a-oo-oo-oo ! "

The howl seemed to intensify the desolation. Presently it was

answered from the far forest depths, and the answer, mingling with the fierce shrieking of the wind, thrilled the girl with an unspeakable shrinking. For the first time since leaving Red Willow Cañon she was conscious of feeling lonesome and unprotected.

She hurried onward. But again she heard the panting breath and felt the vibration of padding feet, this time quite close to her. And when she turned she was alarmed to see that the coyote was not alone.

Dark, moving shapes were visible all around and far back; and all around, like hovering fire-flies, were many tiny specks of brilliant light, all on the same level, shining in pairs, flashing in and out, now golden green, now steely blue, now ruddy gold. And Maple Leaf knew them to be the eyes of great beasts of prey. She could hear the crashing of their bodies through the undergrowth, and the growls deep in their throats as they jostled each other to get near.

Maple Leaf drew in her breath, and Sergeant Silk's words recurred to her.

"You will be running a great risk," he had said. "I think you had better not go."

Suddenly there was an angry snarl, followed by a yelp of pain, and the coyotes bunched closer together, drawing away in a pack. Their eyes gleamed no longer as they had gleamed. Only one pair remained, and this pair, belonging to an animal taller than the rest, was coming nearer and slowly nearer. Maple Leaf knew that they were not the eyes of a harmless coyote, and it was now that she became afraid, for something about the animal's movements had told her that it was the dreaded timber-wolf of the Canadian wilds. It came forward, sniffing audibly, very slowly, very deliberately.

The girl drew back, and her hand went to her revolver. She wrapped a fold of her blanket about her left arm.

The wolf came nearer, lowering its head and shoulders as if about to leap.

Maple Leaf's finger was twitching on the trigger of her weapon; her back was against a tree. Her aim was levelled at a point between the two gleaming eyes. She pulled the trigger sharply, and the wolf leapt into the air and fell with a heavy thud, rolling over, kicking, struggling, and uttering an unearthly yell that seemed to fill the whole forest.

But at the same moment a second and a third wolf appeared. One of them sprang upon its fallen companion and began

savagely to tear at it with ravenous jaws. The other turned towards Maple Leaf, but stopped very suddenly within a bright shaft of light that came from behind the tree against which the girl was leaning.

The appearance of that mysterious shaft of light was hardly less alarming to Maple Leaf than to the timber-wolf. She turned swiftly, and saw that it came from a bull's-eye lantern. But before she could realise whether the lantern was held by friend or foe there was a flash, the loud report of a gun, and the second wolf fell.

"How!" exclaimed a voice that was familiar to her, as the echoes of the gun-shot faded. "It is Maple Leaf herself!"

"My hat, so it is!" cried Percy Rapson.

"How on earth is she here?" added Dan Medlicott, lowering his smoking rifle.

"*Tiens!* But dis ees ver' strange!" muttered Antoine in astonishment.

Rippling Water caught at his sister's arm and drew her to him.

"Alone—without Sergeant Silk?" he said questioningly. "What has happened to him?"

Before she could answer him, the wounded wolf had struggled to its feet, and was rushing at her with wide-open jaws and an angry, menacing snarl.

Rip flung the girl aside and with gloved left hand seized the brute by the throat, while with his right he felt for his knife. The wolf threw him backward with its full weight upon him, and he lost his grip. The two rolled over, the wolf snapping, biting, yelping; Rip slashing blindly, aimlessly, with the long-bladed knife. With a snarl that was part bark and more a scream of fury, the wolf seized him by the leg above the ankle, which was fortunately protected by a thick leather gaiter. They fought together for some moments, writhing and wrestling in such confusion that in the unsteady light of the lantern held by the Moose it was difficult for the excited onlookers to tell which was beast and which was human.

With a violent kick Rip released his leg, but in doing so he got himself under the wolf, and was in a worse position than before.

Antoine leapt forward and caught at one of the animal's hind legs, but lost his hold in a moment. Dan Medlicott stood with his rifle poised, waiting to get a sure shot, but it was Maple Leaf who put an end to the struggle. Flinging herself forward as if to join in the fight, while the wolf's clipping jaws were burrowing for a grip upon Rip's chest, she caught with her left hand at the

loose skin behind the animal's neck, and with her right thrust the muzzle of her revolver against its side and fired. There was a fierce howl as the wolf rolled over, and Rippling Water scrambled to his feet.

Meanwhile Percy Rapson had turned to the third wolf, which had fallen upon its dead companion, tearing it at ravenously. Coolly and very deliberately he had taken aim from behind at the brute's shoulder, and his first shot was enough.

Apart from a few scratches which Rippling Water had received on his face, no one was injured. There were three dead wolves. The one which Percy Rapson had killed was the largest —a grizzled old timber-wolf the like of which even The Moose That Walks had never before seen for size.

"If somebody'll lend me a knife, I'll have that chap's skin and head," said Percy. "It's worth taking home as a trophy."

"Pardon, m'sieu," interposed Antoine. "I t'ink you not know de bes' way for skin de wolf. I—I mek do it for you—what?"

"And Sergeant Silk?" panted Rippling Water, wiping his face with the corner of his sister's blanket. "What has happened to him?"

"Sergeant Silk is alive," replied Maple Leaf. "He is a captive with the Indians in Red Willow Cañon. I have left him there and stolen out from the village for help." She glanced round and shrugged her shoulders as she added: "But we can do nothing—nothing, unless there are many more of you in camp. How many?"

"Four," he told her.

She shook her head sadly as she drew her blanket closer about her.

"It is not enough," she said. "Nine? It is impossible. There must be many more, or he is lost. But now you know where he is. You know that he is waiting—waiting. I will go back to him. I have done what I meant to do. I will go back."

"No," objected her father, coming to her side. "Maple Leaf will not go back. It is not safe. It is not wise. Already my daughter has risked too many dangers. She is a woman. It is not for a woman to do such things. I have spoken."

"Seems to me," said Dan Medlicott, "we'd best quit soon as Antoine has stripped that timber-wolf. Maple Leaf has saved us a heap of trouble. We've no occasion to go any farther, and I've a notion this storm'll be worse 'fore it's better."

He questioned Maple Leaf concerning Sergeant Silk, and

while Antoine continued with his work of skinning the timber-wolf they all joined in a consultation as to what was best to be done. They decided at once to return to camp and attempt to summon help from Fort Battleford.

When all was ready, therefore, they set off on their return journey, Maple Leaf accompanying them. The distance was not great. Beyond the forest there was only one intervening hill, but on the unsheltered hill-side they were exposed to the fury of the wind, and it seemed almost hopeless for them to continue.

The sky was clear of clouds, but the air was filled with a swirling, swishing mist of icy particles and frozen snow caught up from the ground and flung against them, biting and stinging their faces, gathering into icicles about their eyes and nostrils, making them gasp painfully for breath, almost choking them.

They plodded on, keeping close together, with Maple Leaf in their midst, somewhat sheltered from the cruel blast. Antoine had given her his long fur coat and his beaver cap, taking her blanket in exchange.

With every foot that they went the storm became worse, and when they reached the ridge of the hill they had to cling to each other to keep themselves from falling.

"This is a fair blizzard," Percy Rapson panted. "I never saw anything like it in all my natural."

"Blizzard?" repeated Antoine. "But no, m'sieu; it ees not so bad as dat. You 'ave not experience de true blizzard, else you nevaire say deese leettle vinter breeze was anyt'ing for spek of. What? You ask for de Moose What Walk; 'ee no' call dis moch."

"Wough!" grunted the Moose, walking on in front with his long, swinging stride. "Soon we shall all know what a blizzard means. Come! Come!"

He urged them forward by his own example of speed. The wind was behind them as they went down the slope of the hill, plunging knee-deep into the drifts.

They could not yet see the camp-fire, but Rippling Water forged on ahead and discovered that Corporal Glaister had shifted his quarters. The two tents had been blown down, but with the help of his three companions he had dragged the canvas and poles down into a gully and erected a new shelter against a hollow in the cliff, bringing the sleighs in front to make a temporary corral for the horses, and there they found him, nursing a small fire well concealed behind an immense barrier of drifted snow.

During the night the storm increased in violence, and before

morning it had become what Antoine himself acknowledged to be a true blizzard, which kept them close prisoners for two long and terrible days of bitterest cold and discomfort. The fine snow found its way in by every cranny, covering everything. There was no going out. It would have been death to anyone who should venture into the open air.

Fortunately there was an abundance of food and forage and fuel, and Constable Glaister had made his preparations so promptly and completely that the hardship and inconvenience of the enforced imprisonment could be endured. But even with all their care and forethought one of the ranch-men lost a toe and another a finger from frost-bite, and three of the horses were frozen to death.

On the third morning, the howling of the wind having ceased, Antoine and Glaister began to dig a way out through the great barrier of drift snow that had gathered against their dwelling. It was the work of many hours to make a passage, and it was not until the end of the day that they had effected a clearance sufficient to bring their outfit into the open.

Antoine and Dan Medlicott rode out on the following day to make a scouting trip in the direction of Red Willow Cañon. Maple Leaf had given them full instructions how to find their way. But instead of passing through the forest they went by the mountain ridges for greater safety, both in avoiding the snowdrifts and in escaping a possible ambush of Indian scouts.

By noon they had reached the top of the barren hill overlooking the cañon. They kept to the brink and looked down into the gloom of the defile. There was not a wigwam to be seen. The village had been moved, and all that remained of it were the dark circles of ashes that marked the dead camp-fires. Here and there lay the frozen carcase of a horse, a dog, a cow, victims of the blizzard, and around these were vast flocks of carrion crows and a ravenous pack of scavenger wolves.

"We're too late," said Dan. "Sergeant Silk was right, as he always is. Maple Leaf had better have stayed where she was."

Antoine shook his head.

"Dat ees not so," he said. "I t'ink she do ver' well. She come for save de life of foolish people from de blizzard. Suppose we no turn back—pouf! We all go out same for de candle. What?"

"Yes," Dan admitted. "There's something in that. If we hadn't met her, of course we should have been wiped out by the blizzard. But I was only thinking of Sergeant Silk. Where is he now, I wonder?"

CHAPTER XXVII

THE THREATENING BLOW

Bear's Paw and his warriors, and their half-breed allies, had been well prepared to meet the perils of the blizzard; their weather wisdom had told them of its coming. They had entrenched themselves in the depths of Red Willow Cañon, surrounded by mountainous precipices, which shielded them from the fierceness of the wind, and where the hollows of the overhanging cliffs provided shelter for the wigwams and the horses and cattle.

So well had they protected themselves that they suffered very little beyond the mere physical discomfort of the intense cold, although some of the half-breeds were frost-bitten, an infant had died, and several horses and dogs, escaping from their enclosures, had been frozen to death.

As soon as the wind had spent its force the Indians moved out of the cañon, hastening to reinforce their friends on the Saskatchewan.

In the early morning, while the braves and squaws were occupied in rounding up their surviving ponies, loading up their dog-sledges, and otherwise making preparations for a start, Jules, the half-breed bar-tender from Hilton's Jump, went stealthily about the encampment as if in anxious search of something. At first it was amongst the squaws that he searched, but presently, continuing his fruitless wandering, he went round the wigwams.

Most of the door-flaps were thrown open, and as he passed each of them very slowly he peered inquiringly within, searching more boldly in some, where the squaws were rolling up their spare blankets and packing their cooking utensils. But he always turned away disappointed.

"*Tiens!*" he muttered, as he came to one which seemed to be unoccupied. "But dis ees extraordinaire!"

He drew aside the curtain and looked within.

"What do you find so extraordinary then, Jules?" came a man's voice from the shadows far in beyond the smoking embers of the fire.

"Ah!" Jules exclaimed. "Eet ees you'se'f, then, Ser-gean? *Bonjour! Bonjour!* I t'ink you 'ave ver' fine rest all dees long tam, eh? You 'scape de fros'-bite, you keep' you'se'f warm? Dat was ver' grand blizzard, what?"

Sergeant Silk propped himself up on his elbows.

"I am all right," he answered. "I've suffered nothing more serious than the companionship of two very uninteresting and silent Indians, and the want of tobacco. Say, you haven't a spare cigarette about you, have you, Jules?" he added, glancing towards the half-breed's right ear, where one peered out from under his long black hair.

"But, yes," returned Jules very promptly. "*Voilà!* 'Ere ees one. I geeve it you, pleasure."

Silk raised himself to his feet, and, taking the crumpled, ill-made cigarette, smiled gratefully. As he strode to the middle of the mud floor to pick up a piece of glowing charcoal from the ashes of the fire, his limp was hardly perceptible. His sprained ankle had greatly benefited by his enforced rest during the blizzard.

As he stood lighting his cigarette he looked much more like a forlorn trapper than a member of the North-West Mounted Police. The glow from the charcoal shone in his face, showing it to be almost black with grime and smoke and a bristly growth of beard. He wore a dilapidated coat of buffalo skin, and a torn fur cap; his blue trousers with their yellow stripes were the only remains of his smart uniform, and his boots, burnt by the flames at the time of his ordeal at the stake, had been discarded for a pair of old moccasins that were now sullied by wet mud.

"And what was it that you found so extraordinary when you came in here, friend Jules?" he inquired, blowing a double jet of smoke from his nostrils.

Jules glanced around him in the gloom of the wigwam to assure himself that they were alone.

"*Ma foi!*" he returned. "It ees even serious, m'sieu. I mek search all through de village for la belle Indienne, de Maple Leaf, you un'erstan'——"

"Maple Leaf?" cried Sergeant Silk in quick alarm. "Where is she? What has happened?"

"She ees now'ere," Jules answered. "She vanish, pouf! I t'ink de wind she tek de girl in her arm, carry her 'way over de

high tree-top, over de beeg mountain, into de sky." He went closer to the tall soldier-policeman. "You 'ave not see her, Ser-gean ? No ? "

Silk was puffing agitatedly at his cigarette. His brows were gathered in a troubled frown. He had not known that Maple Leaf had left the encampment. He had believed that she had seen that the storm was coming, and that she had resolved to wait.

"Do you mean that she has not been seen since before the blizzard came on ? " he demanded to know. "Do you mean that she was out in it—all alone—on foot—without even a horse ? God help her ! "

His begrimed face had taken on a look of grim anxiety.

"And I—I let her go," he went on, clenching his hands in despair. "I told her not to come back. I ought to have known that she would do what she said. And now—ah ! it is too late—too late ! She could not face a storm like that and live. Too late ! Even if I were free to go and look for her, I could do nothing."

The half-breed gazed at him in surprise.

"So ? " he said. "Eet was for you' sake she go, den ? *Bien !* Now I a leetle un'erstan'. But why you no tell me she go ? It ees possible you no trust me, yes ? You 'ave remembrance I once try for kill you, I lay trap for catch you, I and other from de Hilton's Jump ? Eet was bad, ver' bad. But you may believe, Ser-gean', I 'ave repentance. You save my life, you nurse me t'rough de fever, yes."

He touched the sergeant's elbow.

"Suppose you free, m'sieu," he continued. "You go look for la belle Indienne ? You find de Maple Leaf—dead or 'live ? "

Silk nodded.

"Cert'nly," he said. "But you see, my friend, I am a captive. I cannot escape. It is useless to say what one would do."

Jules turned to the open door-flap and looked out for a few moments. Then he went back into the gloom.

"I mek you free ver' soon," he said, crushing a cinder of burnt wood under the toe of his moccasin.

"You ? " exclaimed Silk.

"But, yes," returned Jules. "*Attendez !* You say you let de Maple Leaf go. *Bien !* To me it ees clear she go for good reason, you see ? I ask not de reason, what ? Now, I tell you what to do. You dress you'se'f as de Indian, queek. You follow me. I mek for hide you, see ? "

Very quickly and adroitly he blackened Silk's face with

charcoal, as the faces of many of the Indians were blackened in token of mourning for their fallen brothers, whose deaths had not yet been avenged. Then he wrapped a very large blanket over him, covering his head; turned up his trousers, so that they would not show beneath the skirts of the blanket, gave him a long knife for a weapon, shoved a bundle under his arm, and then stood back to examine the complete effect.

"*Bien!*" he nodded with satisfaction. "You bend your head, see. You too tall. You cough same you 'ave ver' bad cold. Good! *Maintenant, vite, à la poursuite!*"

Sergeant Silk hesitated only a moment, and then followed the half-breed into the open air, walking as an Indian walks, with long, level strides, and as if, like all the Indians and half-breeds bustling about the camp, he were merely busy making preparations for departure. He held his head bowed, looking down at the ground, and his face was hidden from any inquisitive loiterers who might notice his tall figure in passing with his bundle under his arm.

Jules was careful to avoid the more thronged parts of the encampment, and he did not go very far.

Leading the way behind the medicine lodge, which was being dismantled, he glanced about him furtively before making a sharp turn round the end of a long wreath of snow, which effectually hid him and his follower from all eyes. Then signing to Silk, he indicated a very large snowdrift that had been swept against the cliff in a high sloping bank.

At one point of the smooth white drift a quantity of the snow had been scooped away, and in the midst of the disturbed and trodden slush there lay the carcase of a horse, one of the victims of the blizzard. The horse had been found buried in the drift and dragged out, and the careful Indians had removed its hide to be dressed or tanned for future use, leaving the gruesome carcase for the wolves and crows.

"*Voilà!*" said Jules in a cautious whisper, pointing to the deep hollow from which the dead animal had been dragged. "You creep behind de horse, bury you'se'f in de snow. Nobody mek search for you in such place, so near de camp. It ees quite safe, you see. Suppose you missed, Indian think you escape over de mountain. You wait. Ver' soon everybody march 'way. So! *Au revoir*, Ser-gean!"

From within his hiding-place, Silk patiently watched the Indians breaking camp, collecting their various possessions and gathering themselves together in marching order. None of

them came near him, but he was still anxious until, very abruptly as it seemed to him, the whole disreputable tribe of them were moving off stragglingly, first the scouts, then the chiefs, warriors, and half-breeds, and finally the women, the cattle, and draught dogs.

When they had left his near neighbourhood, he stretched his cramped limbs and lay down with his head protruding from the mouth of the snow-cavern, watching them passing down the cañon, until the last of them had disappeared.

Even yet he did not dare to creep out. He was not cold. His fur coat and the blanket over him kept him warm, and he was too excited to think of physical discomfort. His heart was beating furiously as he realised that at last he was free.

He was free, but in a desolate, mountainous country, where there was no hope of finding food or proper shelter. He had no horse. Wherever he should go he would be compelled to walk, and walking was painful to him with his sprained ankle not yet well.

Already he was making his plans, determining to get back as quickly as possible to civilisation and duty.

Several courses were open to him, each one as perilous and hopeless as the others.

If he should wander northward to the Saskatchewan with the intention of voyaging down the great waterway to one of the Police posts or one of the forts of the Hudson's Bay Company, there was only the faintest possibility of his finding a canoe.

If he should go in any other direction in the hope of reaching some lone trapper's cabin or outlandish ranch, he would have to travel for many days without food and without fire; for he had no gun and no matches. He was utterly destitute. He began to think that he had been unwise in escaping from the Indians, who would at least have preserved him from starvation.

There was another course open to him, but it promised no better prospect of ultimate relief. It was that he should remain where he was, in Red Willow Cañon. Perhaps, in spite of the Indians' customary caution, they had left some neglected spark among the charred remains of their fires, which he could kindle into flame. With a fire, he might subsist for a long time upon the flesh of the dead horse.

And there was the vague possibility that if he remained here, some searchers might discover him. He knew that searchers would be out. His comrades in the Force, however much occupied with other duties, would not let him be lost.

And Maple Leaf had told him that help was coming. He had scarcely credited her belief that a party from Rattlesnake Ranch was close on the trail of the Indians who had captured him. She had said that she had heard the cracking of a whip, and she was so firmly convinced that this was so that she had stolen out from the village in the hope of joining the supposed rescue party.

His thoughts of Maple Leaf determined him in his resolve to remain in Red Willow Cañon. He would remain here in this dug-out in the snow, and every day he would go forth and search for her until he found her.

She had gone out hardly three hours before the blizzard began, and she could not have survived her encounter with such a fierce and fearful storm. No human being could have withstood it, and unless she had been fortunate enough to find some friendly shelter, she must have succumbed. Therefore, he believed that somewhere within the radius of a three hours' journey he was certain to come upon the girl's dead body. He could not hope to find her alive.

His first purpose now was to make a fire. There was an abundance of fuel to be got from the willows and poplars on the hill-sides ; but the fuel was useless unless it could be kindled.

With quick decision he crawled out of his burrow and, passing the dead horse, went limping from patch to patch of the black circles of ashes which marked the places where the Indians' fires had burnt. But the invariable rule of the Redskins of extinguishing their camp-fires had now no exception. They had shovelled snow over the embers ; every particle of charcoal was cold, and there was not a spark to be found.

With a sharp pang of disappointment Sergeant Silk turned away and went back to open the bundle which Jules had thrust under his arm. He had hoped that it might contain food, but there was none. He was satisfied, however, to find his own tunic, which some Indian had purloined and concealed with the intention of carrying away. He put it on under his fur coat, and prepared himself to go in search of Maple Leaf.

Just as he was moving away, a crunching sound in the frozen snow caused him to look round, and he saw a couple of coyotes crawling stealthily towards the dead horse.

"Seems I'm not even going to have that dead nag all to myself," he muttered in despair. "Well, take it my friends. You have as much right to it as I have, and we won't quarrel."

All the time he was wondering about Maple Leaf. Had she been right in her surmise that friendly searchers were following

on the trail ? Had she found them and gone into their camp ? Or had she been mistaken ?

His anxiety concerning the girl grew more and more poignant. Perhaps she was still alive. Perhaps she had gained the shelter of the forest before the blizzard came to its terrible worst. She might even now be lying in the refuge of some hollow tree or cliff cave, and there might still be a possibility of saving her.

But, perhaps, as he feared, she had failed to find any shelter, and if he found her at all it would only be to see her lying dead in the snow. He must know what had happened to her. It was his duty as well as his most earnest desire to find her.

He knew which way she had gone. She had followed the back trail of the Indians, down the cañon and through the farther valleys to the pine forest, and, perhaps, beyond. She must have gone many miles before the storm overtook her, and there was no need to search near at hand.

He thought he might save himself some trouble by crossing one of the intervening hills, instead of going round by the level ground, which the Indians had necessarily followed because of their carts and sledges.

From the ridge of the hill, too, he might by some fortunate chance, discover signs of the searchers, in whom Maple Leaf had so positively believed. If any such searchers were near, they must have made camp, and his eyes might be gladdened by the smoke of their camp-fire !

Without further argument or questioning he set off to climb the hill, keeping always to the ground that had been swept clear of snow, lest his tracks should betray him. For he still feared that the Indians, discovering that he had escaped, would send back their scouts to recapture him.

From the top of the hill he could see no faintest sign to tell him that any human being had ever been within many hundreds of miles of the spot where he stood, and he began to descend, making in the direction of the forest, which he could see as a black patch afar off against the blueness of the sky.

Down below him was the entrance to Red Willow Cañon, and he could see far up the defile to where the encampment of Bear's Paw had been, and where now a pack of coyotes were hungrily feeding upon the carrion remains of the encampment.

He was contemplating the scene of desolation, and wondering if the scavenger animals would leave him a few scraps of horse-flesh upon which to keep himself alive, when he was startled by the sound of hoofs. Had the Indians tracked him to here ?

He sought cover in a dip of the ground and lay down at full length, trusting to escape observation, and wishing that he had a better weapon than an Indian's knife with which to defend himself.

The riders came nearer. He knew that they could discover no mark of his moccasins on the hard frozen ground, from which the blizzard had swept every flake of snow. But they were coming perilously near him. He could hear the panting breath of their horses, could hear their voices.

He listened. They had stopped. He could not catch their words at first. But straining his ears and keeping very still, he at last was able to follow one voice that was clearer and younger than the other. And the words that came to him sent a thrill of joy through every vein and fibre in his being.

"Yes, there's somethin' in that. If we hadn't met her, of course we should have been wiped out by the blizzard. But I was only thinkin' of Sergeant Silk. Where is he now, I wonder?"

Dan Medlicott, by whom the words were spoken, snatched at his reins as his horse gave a sudden start. He looked round for a cause of the animal's alarm, and discovered Sergeant Silk himself running towards him limpingly, and shouting his name.

Sergeant Silk had been found at last. Or was it that he had found his searchers?

In any case the search was over, and within another hour Silk was comfortably quartered in Constable Glaister's camp, eating a good meal and telling the story of his escape, mainly to Maple Leaf, but also to Percy Rapson and the others who had not already heard it.

A hard black frost made it dangerous to travel on the following day, and as there was abundance of food, and Silk required a rest, no move was made. But on the day after they broke camp, and went by the way that Sergeant Silk had come.

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE NEAREST REFUGE

THERE was now no need for Constable Glaister and his companions to follow farther on the trail of Bear's Paw. Having succeeded in his quest, he would in the ordinary course have returned to Banff by way of Rattlesnake Ranch ; but he was now under the command of his superior, and was not called upon to decide what should be done.

Sergeant Silk had determined to push on to Fort Battleford to report himself, to get a new outfit, and to join his comrades of the Force in the active service of subduing the rebel half-breeds and their Indian allies.

Battleford was the nearest Police depot where, as he well knew, almost the whole strength of the Riders of the Plains had already hastened under the command of Colonel Irvine. He knew nothing of the progress of the campaign or of the disposition of the forces. He was only aware that the Police were greatly outnumbered by their enemies, and that even the quiet, suffering little company which he was now leading would be a welcome addition to the defending garrison, upon whom depended thousands of women and children, marked out for butchery, death at the stake, and every nameless horror of Indian war.

" Say, Sergeant, d'you reckon that we're goin' to be of any use when we get there ? " questioned Dan Medlicott when they had come within a day's march of the fort. " Two of us frost-bitten, three down with snow-blindness, yourself with a sore arm and a weak ankle ; one of us a girl, two of us boys. Seems to me we shall only be in Colonel Irvine's way. We'd better have gone back to Rattlesnake Ranch."

" That remains to be seen, Dannie," returned Silk. " While the rebels are gathering around in their thousands, our friends aren't getting any stronger, that's sure. In a case like this, every little helps, and you see it's my duty to go. Besides, we haven't enough grub for ourselves and our horses to last us all the way back to the ranch. A snowstorm would do for us right away.

I'm for making the nearest refuge, whether they want us or not. That's why we're going to Battleford."

"Right," nodded Dan. "You never do anythin' without a good reason. If you proposed goin' to the North Pole, I'd go with you, and trust you down to the ground."

Rippling Water and the Moose went in advance as scouts. The snow-blind and frost-bitten invalids were seated on the sleigh boxes. Maple Leaf rode Antoine's horse, while Antoine trudged on foot, occasionally giving a punch in the ribs to the men in the sleigh-beds to keep them awake, as it was bitterly cold and it would have been dangerous for them to sleep.

All day long they drove on through sparkling, frosted woodlands and white glades, crossing ice-bound creeks and plodding their difficult way over wind-swept hill-sides and through shadowed valleys where the snow lay deep. At night they camped in some sheltered coulee, thankful for the warmth of their bivouac fire and the protection of their sleeping-bags.

As they approached within sight of the great Saskatchewan River, with its boisterous rapids that resisted the grip of the frost, they came upon many signs of Indians. Deserted homesteads and pillaged ranches gave mute evidence that the white settlers had either fallen victims to the savages, or else that they had abandoned their homes and fled in alarm to a more secure refuge.

Sergeant Silk began to fear that there was considerable danger in going farther. He exercised the utmost caution to avoid being discovered, and when he came within a few miles of Battleford, where signs of the hostiles were yet more numerous, he made camp in the depths of a wood, well hidden and well protected, and, waiting until nightfall, sent out his two Indian scouts to investigate.

Rippling Water and his father needed no disguise, and they were naturally cautious and skilled in taking cover. They went out by different ways, with instructions to return before midnight, and within the given time they came back to report that Battleford was surrounded by the rebels, who had enclosed the fort with a ring of rifle-pits. The fort itself appeared to be crowded with people. There were Mounted Police on guard at the gates of the stockades.

"D'you reckon we could manage anyhow to get inside—the lot of us?" Silk inquired of Rippling Water.

Rip answered with a doubtful shrug.

"It doesn't seem anyways easy," he said; "not with our horses and the sleds. You could manage it yourself, dare say,

and prepare the way for the rest of us to slip in one by one. You've got to get through their ring of outposts. But it's worth tryin', sure."

"So I thought," nodded Silk. "See, we can't stay here, and we can't go back."

"You'll have to work round to the risin' ground back of the fort," Rip advised. "Dare say you could flash a signal from there and let them know that we're hangin' around."

"Eh?" Silk exclaimed, seizing at the suggestion. "You reckon they'd see a signal, do you? Good! I'll go right now, and you can act as guide. You know where the pickets are stationed."

"And I'll go with you, if you'll let me," Dan Medlicott proposed, standing at the sergeant's side, heavily muffled in furs. "You may want to send a message back to Constable Glaister."

"Exactly," agreed Silk. "And in case I'm dropped on by the enemy, you can take my place and get in touch with Colonel Irvine."

He lighted a bull's-eye lantern, which he concealed under his fur overcoat, the while he gave instructions to Glaister. All three of them armed themselves with revolvers and set off on foot out of the wood, going very cautiously and silently, and keeping an alert look-out for any of the rebel scouts who might be prowling around.

From the edge of the timber they looked down into the wide valley of the Saskatchewan, white with newly-fallen snow. There was no moon, but the flickering rosy light of the aurora borealis made the landmarks clear, and at the far end of the valley, where it narrowed, they could make out the ruddy glare from the Indians' lodge fires rising above the shadowy shapes of many huts and wigwams.

Rippling Water pointed downward to the nearer bank of the dark and silent river, where the village of Battleford lay dimly discernible among the trees, backed by the fort.

"You see, sir, it is not far," he said. "But it is not safe to go straight across. We had better go round by the westward."

Silk and Dan followed him in a slanting direction down the bluff, walking silently through a thicket of birch and saskatoon bushes to the level ground beyond, where they waited, listening and trying to make sure that their way was clear.

Just as they were stepping out into the open, making no sound but the crunching of the frozen snow beneath their moccasins, Rip came to an abrupt halt and caught warningly at the sergeant's sleeve. At the same moment Silk himself was drawing back into the deep shadows.

"There's someone comin' this way," whispered Dan Medlicott. He, too, had heard the snorting of a horse and the crunching of hoofs in the snow.

All three of them crouched down on hands and knees behind a bush, peering outward through its bare branches. They heard a man's hoarse cough. The crunching of hoofs in the snow came nearer and nearer. The horse was walking. The saddle creaked. Sergeant Silk drew his revolver, to be ready in case of discovery, and made sure that no faintest gleam of his lighted lantern escaped from beneath his coat.

There was a long interval of suspense, but at length the horseman loomed in sight quite near to them, clearly outlined against the rosy light of the sky, with his beaver-skin cap pulled down low over his forehead, his fur collar turned up, a rifle in the crook of his left arm. His horse stumbled as it passed, and the rider raised his head. Dan Medlicott pressed his elbow against Silk's arm; but it was not until the horseman was again out of sight and beyond hearing that he spoke.

"Did you see who it was?" he questioned in a whisper. "It was Josh Casterley!"

"Sure!" nodded Silk.

"And you've got a warrant for his arrest," pursued Dan. "Why didn't you nab him?"

"Hush!" cautioned Silk. "There's another of them coming."

Casterley had already disappeared round the corner of the bluff when the second horseman loomed into view. He was a half-breed scout, who was obviously much more alert than Casterley had been, for he sat upright in his saddle and turned his gaze searchingly from side to side as he rode with his hand on the lock of his gun. He must have been attentively listening, also, for when he came abreast of the bush behind which the three were hiding, he drew rein and remained perfectly still, leaning slightly forward with his eyes fixed upon the bush.

Dan Medlicott had dropped to his knees in a position so awkward that his tendons soon became painful with the strain. He tried to relieve the pain by supporting his weight on an outstretched arm, but though he moved with extreme caution, he yet was unfortunate enough to lean upon a twig which broke with a tiny snap.

"So?" exclaimed the scout, hearing it. He urged his horse forward a few steps. "Who is there, then? Speak! Otherwise, I fire—I shoot! What?"

Instead of answering, Sergeant Silk rose to his feet and flashed his lantern light into the scout's face.

"Ah, well met, my friend," he said. "It is you, then, Jules!"

"*Tiens!*" exclaimed Jules in amazement. "Is it possibly Sergean' Silk? *Tiens!*"

He leapt from his saddle, extending his hand.

"I am astonish!" he went on. "You 'ave feenish eat de horse of Monsieur Gabriel, then? You 'ave escape de scouts what mek de search for you? But, yes, I know ver' well it is so." He shielded his eyes from the glare of the lantern. "I see you 'ave companion," he said. "Per'aps la belle Maple Leaf, eh? You mek find her? She is here?"

Silk directed the ray of light u[illegible] Dan and Rip for a moment.

"No," he answered, "I have n[illegible] brought her here, although it is true that I found her."

"*Bien!*" Jules nodded with satisfaction. "I am much content."

"And now, my friend," resumed Sergeant Silk, closing the shutter of his lantern with a snap, "with your permission we will pass on."

Jules shook his head.

"Pardon," he objected, standing with his legs apart and his finger on the trigger of his rifle. "Dis tam it is not convenable that I 'elp you, *voyez-vous*? I am 'ere for do my duty. It is possible you carry de secret dispatch into Battleford. It is not permitted that you mek for help de enemies of Monsieur Gabriel Dumont. Suppose I see you try for pass de cordon, I shoot you ver' queek—pouf!"

Sergeant Silk smiled.

"We are three to one, Jules," he said.

"Not at all," returned Jules. "I, it is true, I am alone 'ere. But de same tam, you 'ave up against you one ver' beeg army of my friends, you un'erstand?"

"And suppose," said Silk, "that you do not happen to see us pass? Suppose you happen to be looking another way?"

"*Parbleu!*" exclaimed Jules, smiling in his turn and tucking his rifle under his arm. "But dat would be ver' droll, certainly. Also, it is not agreeable to me that I disturb my comrades wid de shooting of de gun. I close my eyes, then, I mek sing ze chanson, I ride 'way."

He turned to remount his horse. "*Au revoir!*" he muttered, leaping into the saddle. And as he rode slowly away they heard him singing to himself one of the old French-Canadian boat songs.

CHAPTER XXIX

ON SECRET SERVICE

"SEEMS to me you're always in luck, Sergeant," said Dan Medlicott, as they once more continued their journey. "Whenever you're in a tight corner someone's sure to turn up to help you—someone to whom at some time or other you've done a remembered kindness."

"All the same," returned Silk, "I can't say that I think very highly of Jules' sense of duty. He oughtn't to have let us pass, you know, however much he thought he owed us for past favours. I'm sorry now that we didn't bring our whole camp and outfit along with us," he regretted. "We might all have got through just as easily. But we're not out of the wood yet. Some others of their scouts may yet get on our track and nab us before we get into safety."

It appeared, however, that the rebels were so confident in their superiority of numbers that they were not keeping up a very vigilant watch, and Silk and his two companions had crossed the valley to the rising ground behind the fort before they encountered any further obstacle.

From the top of the wooded hill they could see over into the barrack-square, where the cloaked sentries paced to and fro in the light of a huge fire.

Silk began to flash with his lantern, trying to attract attention by means of the Morse code, while Dan and Rip watched for a reply. They moved from point to point, repeating and repeating their message. But no reply came to them, and Silk at length determined to approach the gates in the faint hope that he might gain an entrance.

The three of them advanced in close company, crawling from cover to cover; but they had not gone far when they perceived that the fort was ringed round by mounted Indian pickets so closely stationed in communication with one another that it appeared impossible to evade them. One of them rode past so

closely that it seemed he must surely have heard or seen them in their hiding-place. But he went by without showing any suspicion. When he had passed out of sight, Silk whispered :

" Wait here, boys. Lie low until I come back. I'm going to make a rush for it. If anything happens to me, you'd better find your way to the camp. See ? "

His " rush " was certainly not a hurried or incautious one. He crept on hands and knees in the snow, keeping in the hollows and going by roundabout ways to take advantage of every bush and boulder, halting very often, and lying for many minutes motionless, watching and listening.

A half-breed on a wheezy piebald broncho passed within a dozen yards of him, smoking a cigarette, with which he was so much concerned that he paid no regard to his surroundings.

Silk began to wonder whether after all there were any white people within the fort. He had seen some shadowy figures moving about in the barrack-yard ; but so cloaked were they that they might very well be Indians or a detachment of the army of half-breeds. He was thankful now that he had come alone without imperilling the safety of his camp companions.

He waited for his next opportunity and went on again. A dry ditch enabled him to crawl within a few yards of the high palisade.

Through the gaps in the upright timbers he could see the gleam of the fire in the barrack-square. He could hear the crackling of the burning wood. There was no gate near, and the palisade was too high for him to climb.

He crept closer, wishing to look through one of the gaps in the hope that someone whom he could hail would be within hearing of him.

Suddenly, while he hesitated, glancing backward to the way by which he had approached, to make sure that he had not been tracked, a long, moving shadow fell upon the whiteness of the snow beside him, cast by the light from the fire. He turned sharply in time to see the dark form of a man who was in the act of climbing over the high paling from the inside and preparing to drop. Outlined against the light, he looked like an Indian ; but it was only for an instant that Silk saw him as he turned and dropped into the darkness.

Silk crouched, keeping very still in the black shadows. But before he could distinguish any movement the stranger recovered his feet and ran forward, full tilt against him.

They both fell, Silk undermost. He struggled beneath the folds of a heavy cloak that was stifling him, and as he got

his head free a strong hand seized him by the throat and a ring of cold steel was pressed against his forehead.

"Say, I've got the pull of you this time, you varmint," declared his assailant deep in his throat. "Stir a hand and you're a dead man. D'you hear?"

Silk knew the voice instantly, but his own speech was choked by the firm grip of the gloved hand on his throat. He lay still, knowing that the trigger would only be pulled in self-defence, as a last resort, and presently, as he expected, the cold barrel of the revolver was drawn away, and as the grip on his throat relaxed he gasped painfully:

"Medlicott! Bob! It's me—Silk!"

"Silk? What on earth are you doing here?"

Bob Medlicott swiftly pocketed his revolver and caught excitedly at the sergeant's shoulders, staring down into his face by the dim reflected light.

"I might ask you the same question," returned Silk, sitting up and adjusting his cap. "I'm here trying to get into Fort Battleford. It seems you're as anxious to get out of it. Listen!" he whispered. "There's a whole squad of us camped out in a wood over there—Glaister, Percy Rapson, Maple Leaf, and others. And your brother Dan's in ambush not many yards from here. I've been trying to signal for an hour past. Aren't any of the boys on the watch? Say, how are we to get inside?"

"You wouldn't want to get inside if you knew how we're placed," responded Medlicott. "We're held up, surrounded, cut off by the enemy. There's hundreds of homeless women and children in the fort. It's their only refuge. They've come in from the ranches. Heaven alone knows how long it will last. We can do nothing against such an army of savages. And we can't get help."

Sergeant Silk had instantly forgiven his comrade for his attack upon him, and for the time being he thought only of the women and children.

"Can't get help?" he repeated. "What do you mean? Are there no soldiers in Canada?"

Medlicott glanced about him anxiously before answering.

"The rebels have cut the telegraph wires," he declared.

"Oh, I see," returned Silk. "That's bad medicine. And you—what are you out here for? Why did you climb the palisade instead of coming out by the usual way of the gate?"

They had both drawn back into the deep shadows, and they spoke in whispers.

"I am going out on secret service," said Medlicott. "I'm going to try to get to Batoche Crossing and telegraph from there to the Minister of Militia at Ottawa."

"Good," nodded Silk. "Why didn't that occur to the commandant before?"

"It occurred to him a week ago and more," explained Bob. "Every night one of our chaps has gone out on the same errand. None of them has come back. It's my turn to-night. Guess I'll get through, togged out like an Indian."

"Got a horse?" inquired Silk.

"No. The others rode. That's how they failed. I'm going on foot."

Sergeant Silk made no comment.

"Well?" questioned Bob. He had profound faith in the sergeant's ingenuity. "The plan's all right, eh?"

"Why, cert'nly," returned Silk. "Quite an excellent plan—if there were no hostiles prowling around. But the neighbourhood's full of them. There's liable to be more still round about Batoche, since that's the rebels' headquarters. If you've a notion that you're going to get that telegram sent from Batoche the way you're going about it, you're less of a scout than I thought, Bob, and you may as well climb over that palisade again and see if you can fix up a plan for getting my camp companions into safety while I go back and fetch them along."

"Fetching them along won't bring the soldiers to relieve the fort," objected Bob. "And now that I've started I reckon I'll push on."

"You'll sure push on to your death, then," Silk warned him. "There's not half a chance even for a mosquito to push through to Batoche unseen, going across country the way you intend."

"I don't know of any better way," Bob still hesitated.

"Don't you?" pursued Silk. "Say, what's the matter with the Saskatchewan River? Isn't that good enough?"

Bob Medlicott stared at him in astonishment in the darkness, trying to see if there were a smile on his face or if his tongue were in his cheek.

"The river?" he cried. "Do you forget the rapids? Why, there isn't a man in the Force could take a canoe from here to Batoche—unless——" he paused, "unless it's yourself."

Silk drew his fur collar higher about his neck.

"Well," he said. "Come to that, I've done it before. I'd do it again. I'm ready to start right now, if you can give me some grub and a pipe of tobacco. What were you going to telegraph?"

Bob repeated the intended message.

"Good," nodded Silk. "That ought to fetch them. And now, you just hang around right here until I go and bring Dan and young Rippling Water."

He was absent hardly five minutes, when he returned with Rip and Dan.

"Are you going to venture, then, Sergeant?" Bob asked.

"Why, cert'nly," declared Silk; "if I can get a good canoe."

"There's one at the mouth of the creek," Medlicott informed him. "You know the old place. You can have my haversack, too. It's got everything you'll need. I see you have your side arm; but you'd better take my rifle and cartridge belt as well. Are you going alone?"

"No, not if Dan will go along with me."

"Need you ask?" said Dan, eager for an adventure with such a companion.

"Then it's fixed," declared Silk.

Turning to Rippling Water, he added:

"Rip, you'll stay here and be ready to guide Constable Medlicott and a party of troopers across to our camp. Bob, you'll sling yourself across the palisade into the fort. I'll give you a leg up. Go to Colonel Irvine; tell him where I've gone, and ask him to favour me by sending out an armed guard to bring in refugees. You understand? Right! Climb up on my shoulder, and over you go."

He looked up at his comrade perched on the paling.

"So long, then," he added. "Come on, Dan."

Dan Medlicott followed him closely into the ambush of the dry ditch. They went forward with heads and bodies bent. Sometimes they could walk upright, at others they had need to crawl along the snowy ground on their hands and knees. Once they lay for a long while behind a boulder waiting until two half-breed scouts should light their cigarettes and smoke them over a conversation concerning an Indian girl named Day Star, in whom they were mutually interested. And once again they were alarmed by a brave who clattered across their path on horseback, noisily drunk.

But at length they reached the frozen creek and went down it on the ice, well hidden by the high, wooded banks. They had made almost a complete circuit of Battleford, but now they were between the village and the river, and at the mouth of the creek.

"Are you sure you know where to find that canoe, Sergeant?"

Dan inquired. "We shall be in a nasty mess if it's been stolen or stove in, or if it's frozen up in the ice."

Silk glanced up at the sky and then out to the river.

"I am only anxious that we should get safely started before daybreak," he murmured in a cautiously low voice, making his way up the sloping, slippery bank and in amongst the trees. "Stay where you are, behind that stout tree-trunk, and keep a sharp look-out. Give me a sign if you see or hear any Indians prowling around."

Dan watched him crawling into the deep darkness of the wood, and after a long interval of uneventful waiting, he saw the faint reflected light of the lantern moving across the bare trunks and branches. Then the light was shut off, and presently he heard a slight wrenching sound, which told him that the sergeant had found the canoe and was getting it free from the frozen mud, in which it had settled.

"What about the canoe?" Dan inquired, when Silk returned to him.

"I've got it, right enough, paddles and all," Silk told him. "We can carry it between us down the creek until we come to the thin ice. Then we must do some portage across the spit of land and get afloat."

The canoe was a light one, and they carried it without great difficulty. But to launch it was not easy, for the shallows at the edge of the river were frozen and it was necessary to break a channel through the ice, and the noise might attract the Indians to the spot.

Sergeant Silk managed as quietly as he could to make an opening large enough to contain the canoe, and they both got in. Dan took a paddle and paddled outward, while Silk at the prow smashed a way through the stubborn obstacle.

As he came to the thinner ice, the work was easy, but, as he had feared, the suspicious sound of the breaking of ice had been heard in the silence of the night, and he had just won through to the deep water of the swift current when a rifle-shot rang out from among the trees at the mouth of the creek and a bullet struck Dan Medlicott's paddle.

"Keep cool," Silk recommended, taking up his own paddle. "That chap's a good shot."

They crouched low, so that hardly more than their heads and shoulders were above the level of the gunwales, and by paddling across the current they kept the canoe end on and less exposed than if they had at once steered with the stream.

A second and a third shot sounded, and then quite a volley, but no bullet struck, and soon the firing ceased.

Even when they were beyond range they still went across the current as if with the intention of getting to the farther side of the great river.

But in mid-stream they allowed the canoe to drift, while Silk brought out food from his haversack and loaded his pipe.

"We can't go a great distance to-night, Dannie," he said as he got down in the bilge and lighted up. "You'd better wrap my overcoat around you and lie down and have a snooze. I'm sure you need one. I can keep myself warm by paddling until daylight. We can only travel in the darkness, see? We shall have to lie in hiding all to-morrow. But to-morrow night I guess you're going to have the adventure of your life. That's if we can escape so far without being dropped on by the Indians. What's the adventure? Oh, it's just that we've to negotiate the rapids. It's sure dangerous. If we hit the wrong channel, it's a certain death-trap. It leads through the most horrible cañon in all Canada, a sort of subterranean river running at express speed. It's risky, bringing you on a trip like this. You can only trust to luck to get through."

"I will trust to you, Sergeant," said Dan, with confidence.

CHAPTER XXX

SILK HAS A SURPRISE

To be lulled to sleep in a buoyant canoe on a calm Canadian river in the warm fragrance of a summer night is one of the happiest of human experiences. But the same couch is not to be desired in the depth of winter, when the bitter north wind is blowing from the icy mountains, when the cold is below zero, and your frail craft is being tossed and swirled about in the angry grip of a fiercely running current that threatens with every moment to bring you to disaster.

Dan Medlicott slept very little that first night of his voyage with Sergeant Silk down the Saskatchewan. The restless rocking of the canoe made him feel sick, his feet were cold, his limbs ached, he was hungry; it was impossible for him to get into a comfortable position in spite of the fur coats and the blankets in which his companion had considerately wrapped him.

"Say, Sergeant, it's no good," he complained, after a long interval of silence. "There's no use my tryin' to sleep. I can't. I should be heaps better helpin' you with the other paddle."

"Why, but you ought to be able to sleep on the edge of a knife after all you've gone through in the past twelve hours," said Silk, poising his dripping paddle. "But if you like, I'll pull in to the shore and we can lie up for a while to have a sensible snooze on solid ground. We must both have a good rest before we go through the rapids. We shall need all our strength, see? Besides, it's close on daylight now, and the Indians are sure to be on the watch for us. I guess they know as well as we do ourselves why we're going to Batoche, and they'll do their level best to prevent us from getting through."

Dan agreed to his proposal, knowing that Sergeant Silk was himself in urgent need of rest, and so they paddled landward and concealed themselves and their canoe in the mouth of a sheltered creek, where they kindled a fire, made tea, and, curling themselves up in their blankets and furs, slept until far on in the morning.

A thick white mist lay over the river, and the trees were coated with hoar frost. Silk's moustache and eyebrows were also white with his frozen breath. Everything that had been moist was frozen, excepting where the warmth of the bivouac fire had reached, and Silk had taken care before going to sleep that the fire should be so replenished that it would keep alight until he should awake.

"This fog puts an end to our expedition," said Dan very ruefully. "We may be held up here for days. And without food, too."

Silk dropped the bundle of faggots that he had been gathering.

"I don't look at it that way," he declared in an unexpectedly cheerful tone. "What's the matter with the fog? I'm sure it's very beautiful. Back there it's quite a fairyland with every twig and blade of grass and spider-web frosted over like silver. I should say we're quite in luck."

"Luck?" Dan repeated. "Where does the luck come in?"

"Oh, well, it may be some awkward if we run against a snag and get capsized," said Silk. "But if we keep in midstream and go with the current, I reckon we shall come to no harm. You see, if the mist hides the landmarks from us, it also hides us from the prying eyes of the Indians' scouts. It's heaps better than the darkness of a moonless night. We shall gain hours if we start right now instead of wasting a whole day waiting for nightfall. Say, is there any of that pemmican left?"

"Just enough for breakfast," Dan told him, stirring the fire before putting a dipper of water on to boil. "And there's two biscuits."

Sergeant Silk himself made the pemmican soup, thickening it with broken biscuit.

"You're an extraordinary good cook, Sergeant," was Dan's comment when he tasted it. "I believe you could contrive to make a savoury dish out of a bit of old shoe leather."

"Never tried it but once," smiled Silk. "But you can generally find heaps of things to feed on before starting on your boots. Once I made a passably good meal out of the bones of a dead wolf, and I tell you it wasn't half bad."

"You must have been hard put to it to eat dead wolf," reflected Dan. "But that's a common occurrence up in the far north, in such desolate, barren places as Turnagain Pass. I didn't know you'd been on the North Patrol."

"I didn't say that I had," returned Silk; "although, as a matter of fact, I have been. But why do you mention Turnagain Pass in particular? It's not the only place where a fellow

can be short of grub. What do you know about Turnagain Pass ? "

Dan sipped at his pemmican soup.

" I was only thinkin' of a yarn I once heard about two chaps that were on their way down from the diggings to Fort Fraser," he responded. " They hadn't enough grub for them both, and while one was asleep, or ill, the other sneaked the little they had, and the bag of gold dust as well, and left his pardner to starve to death."

" The mean skunk ! " ruminated Silk, taking out his pipe.

" Say, why don't you eat your soup while it's hot ? " Dan asked, seeing that the sergeant was preparing to light up instead of taking any breakfast.

" I'm not anyways hungry," the sergeant answered with a forced smile. " You can have my whack."

" Not I," declared Dan. " You've got to have your share. If you can't eat it now, you can have it for dinner, middle of the day. It's little enough. And, come to think of it, I don't just know what we're goin' to do for to-night's supper."

" H'm ! " muttered Silk uneasily. " Perhaps we ought to provide something before we start from here. There aren't any provision stores the way we're going."

He bent forward and took a burning twig from the fire with which to light his pipe.

" I came upon the track of a jack rabbit when I was back there cutting wood," he continued. " Guess I'll go along and see if I can run him to earth. Rabbit makes a ripping fine stew. Heaps better than shoe leather. Do you mind waiting here while I go a-hunting ? "

" You might get lost in this fog," Dan warned him.

" Not if I follow my back tracks," said Silk. " But you can keep your ears propped up in case I sing out for help."

Dan crouched within the warmth of the fire, and watched him as he went into the fog, gradually becoming less distinct, until at last his tall figure, looking like a gigantic spectre in its furs, faded to a mere shadow, and then was merged in the whiteness of the mist.

He was absent much longer than Dan expected him to be, and he reappeared very silently from beside the canoe, into which he dropped something heavy which Dan did not see.

" Are you all right, there, Dan ? " he called.

" Yes," Dan answered. " Where've you been ? Did you get that jack rabbit ? "

"No. Wait a bit longer," said Silk. "I shall not be long."

Again he went away. He was absent about a quarter of an hour, when he again returned to drop something into the canoe. Then he strode to the fire and sat down, looking strangely haggard.

He was silent for a long time.

"Well?" said Dan. "Brought in any food?"

"Food?" Silk responded absently. "Yes, I got some food. Enough."

He lighted his pipe anew and smoked in silence, Dan watching him and wondering at the singular change that had come over him. At length Silk looked up.

"Say, you knew Corporal Merryweather, didn't you?" he questioned.

"Yes. Why? What makes you ask?"

Silk drew a deep breath.

"Guess he was one of those that went out from Battleford on the same errand that we're on now," he resumed. "He went out on the night of the blizzard and must have got lost. He didn't get very far. I've just found him—him and his horse, lying together in a drift of snow."

"Dead?" exclaimed Dan.

"Why, cert'nly," nodded Silk. "I've put his gun and things in the canoe. He hadn't touched any of the food in his haversack, nor the spirits in his flask. I reckon it was the horse that was the first to give in. Tom sheltered behind the animal's body. It wasn't a whole lot of good, though."

He had put forth his hand and took up the dipper of soup.

"I'll just have a sup of this, now that we've got something else," he said. And Dan noticed that he drained it to the very last drop.

"And now we'll make a start," Silk announced, rising to his feet. "We must do our duty to the living before we attend to the dead."

Dan saw that the sergeant had brought away only such things as might be useful to them during their journey—the corporal's fur coat and blanket, his carbine, revolver and cartridge-belt, with his haversack.

Silk did not again refer to his dead comrade, but made an effort to appear cheerful for Dan's sake. His effort, however, was not very successful, for in everything he said there was an undercurrent of gloom.

"Yes," he said, when they stood by the fire preparing to

extinguish it before getting the canoe afloat, "he was about as mean a skunk as ever I've heard of, that chap who deserted his chum in Turnagain Pass. I can hardly believe it, but I suppose you know it to be true?"

"Sure," averred Dan. "They'd been up the Yukon together, and had got a pile of gold. They were takin' it down to Fort Fraser, and the mean skunk, as you call him, was Josh Casterley."

"What?" cried Silk, turning sharply and looking at Dan in bewilderment. "Josh Casterley? Say, I never knew that Josh had ever been up there. Who told you? Not Josh himself? Josh never told you or anybody else such a story against himself."

Dan was surprised at the Sergeant's concern.

"No," he answered. "I learnt about it by accident. It was on that night when we were in Dead Lodge Valley, and I was on guard outside the blockhouse in which Josh and Nosey Foster were prisoners, you remember. While I was doing sentry-go, Nosey and Josh began to quarrel. I couldn't help overhearing them."

"Well?" urged Sergeant Silk. "There can be no harm in your repeating what you heard—if you can remember it."

"I can remember Nosey's very words," said Dan. "Nosey said to Josh—'Yes. Dessay you made a pile, same as everybody else. That bag of dust you brought down to Fort Fraser was a fortune in itself. What I can never make out is why you never went back for more. Guess you was afraid of ghosts.' Then Josh asked him what he meant, and Nosey went on: 'Oh, well,' he said, 'you left Dawson City with a pardner. You came to Fort Fraser without one, and never said anything to anybody about havin' had one. Where did you leave that pardner, Josh?' he asked. 'Anywhere near a wild, desolate place called Turnagain Pass?'"

Sergeant Silk gathered the fire together instead of putting it out.

"Well?" he repeated, as Dan paused. "Josh denied it, of course?"

"Yes," resumed Dan. "And Nosey said: 'Yes you did. You left him to starve, you did. You did a bunk with all the gold, and, worse than that, with all the grub. And he died—died of starvation, where we afterwards found his bones. And your own brother, too!'"

"What?" cried Silk, with a forward start. "His brother?

Josh Casterley's brother ? " His interest in what Dan had just told him was extraordinary. " Are you sure—quite sure—that Nosey said that ? " he asked. " That it was his own brother that Casterley deserted, and robbed, and left there to die ? "

" Sure ! " Dan nodded. " But why ? I never saw you so excited before. Why ? Is it anything so strange ? You've known all along that Josh was a scoundrel. Why does it surprise you that the man he left to starve was his brother ? "

" Never mind—not now," returned Sergeant Silk. " I've not got the hang of it all, quite. I must cipher it all out. I'll tell you afterwards—after we've got through the rapids ; if we ever do get through. Dash out the fire. Shove some snow on it, and come. Let us quit."

CHAPTER XXXI

THROUGH THE RAPIDS

Having well secured their few belongings in the canoe they paddled out into midstream, beyond the fringe of ice. Silk took his bearings by his pocket compass, and, knowing how the river ran, was practically independent of the landmarks which the fog obscured.

Their paddles dipped noiselessly, and the gurgling of the water along the outer fabric of the canoe as they swept swiftly along was the only sound that came to them. Along the high banks the forest trees stood out like ghostly shapes, white with rime.

Once as they passed across the mouth of a frozen rock. Dan Medlicott paused in his work momentarily alarmed by the movement of a large dark form. Sergeant Silk also arrested his paddle, letting the canoe drift.

"Say, that's a monster, eh?" he remarked.

It was a gigantic moose, with immense spreading antlers, standing knee-deep in the broken ice, the breath coming like smoke from its quivering nostrils.

"Shouldn't you like to have a shot at him, Dan?" the sergeant asked. "A bullet just behind the shoulder would do for him slick, and his tremendous antlers would make a rare ornament in the parlour at Rattlesnake Ranch, if we'd time to spare."

"Which we haven't," said Dan, resuming his paddling.

At about midday, when the crimson sun was struggling to penetrate the mist, they were contemplating going ashore to make a fire and boil some water for coffee, when they came suddenly to a gap in the bank, and, looking up a wide valley, they discovered a large village of Indian lodges, with their camp fires alight and the Indians grouped around them. A brave, rounding up some straying ponies, caught sight of the canoe and gave the alarm.

Silk decided that it was not safe to land, and he kept the

canoe steady while Dan and he nibbled a biscuit drank what remained of their cold tea.

From this point the river began to narrow be precipitous mountains, which closed in, gradually c river by their barrier walls and increasing the spee rush.

There was no need now to paddle forward. Th being carried along so swiftly by the current that a be done was to guard her from being flung rocks.

"Say, you'd best lie down there in the stern, nov Silk said grimly. "We shall be in the midst of the soon."

"Aren't we in them already?" Dan inquired a "This is sure bad enough."

"Well," returned Silk, without looking round, " of a hustle on the water, I'll allow. But this is not it will be presently when we get into the narrows. to hold on like grim death, see? I shall not be able to I've got all my work cut out without having to thi safety. Lay hold of the cross-spar with both your hands. your knees against the sides. Don't be afraid if you wetting. Just lie still and hold tight. So long, if we don't through."

"So long, Sergeant," Dan murmured with a shiver that wa partly of cold, partly of vague dread of what was coming.

That Sergeant Silk, whom he had never known to shrink from any danger, should have bidden him farewell, was of itself a circumstance which proved his fear of the enormous peril that was threatening them. But whatever the peril and whatever the chance of coming out of it alive, the only thing to do now was promptly and completely to obey the sergeant's orders.

Dan lay down on the blankets in the bottom of the canoe, his outstretched hands gripping the spar, and his elbows well under him pressed rigidly. In this position he could raise his head and watch what was happening. He saw Sergeant Silk crouched near the prow with his back to him, working his steering paddle with the easy strength of one who was as skilful at managing a boat as controlling a horse, winning it to quick obedience with a touch. Dipping his blade always at the right moment, he adroitly kept the canoe level in the middle of the swirling current where the water was deepest and smoothest, letting it be carried in the grip of the eddying stream, only guiding

...d strong backward stroke or a well-measured

...es it seemed to Dan that they were being hurled ...certain destruction against a projecting point of cliff; ...e held his breath in dread anticipation of the final ...row of the canoe would rise and swing round to ...hreatening obstacle and shoot outward into safety ...yet more awful danger loomed ahead through the ...ist.

...he cliffs had sloped backward to the heights on ...idden in the overhanging fog, with the river flowing ... smoothly between; but the precipitous walls, ...th frozen spray and long icicles, drew nearer and ...ner, until high above there was only a faint ribbon ..., through which the light of the sky filtered dimly. ...was black darkness, and the river seemed to end ... boiling swirl of angry foam and great blue furrows.

..." cried Sergeant Silk in a voice that mingled ... ...underous roar of the turbulent waters. His ... forward and his paddle dipped with quick, un...rokes. The canoe leapt out of the lash of waves as if ...y some mighty force from beneath, and then with a thud ...sent the spray flying, shot outward into the headlong rush ...was swept trembling round the bend into uttermost dark...ss.

To Dan it appeared that they were now racing down a watery hill ...to fathomless depths. He could see nothing. He could feel nothing but the cold rush of icy air and the sickening motion of the frail canoe as it swayed and plunged from side to side. But he knew that Sergeant Silk was no longer plying his paddle. He could almost have believed that he was alone. Fearing at every moment that his end had come, he let his head drop across his arm and closed his eyes, waiting, waiting, for he knew not what.

But the suspense and uncertainty tortured him, and as he raised his head his sight was blinded by a bright gleam of light in his eyes. The source of the light seemed miles and miles away, yet he knew that it was near; he knew what it was.

Sergeant Silk had turned round on his hands and knees, had opened the shutter of his bull's-eye lantern, to flash the bright beam backward for a moment to assure himself that Dan was still safe.

The moving light was caught by the enclosing walls, which,

incrusted with ice and rime, glistened and sparkled like walls of purest crystal, radiant with stars of blue and red and gold.

Silk flung himself down in the bottom of the canoe, covering his lantern, and they went on and on, held in the grip of the current, utterly helpless, utterly at the mercy of the flood.

How long it lasted, Dan Medlicott never could have told. It seemed to him like an endless, terrible nightmare, from which he would never awake. He was trembling in every limb, his teeth chattered, his brain reeled ; but still he held on to the spar with hands that were numb with cold in spite of the fur gloves that covered them. Truly had Sergeant Silk foretold that this was to be the adventure of his life.

Once more he bowed his head and closed his eyes, wondering if ever again he should look upon a human face or the rosy splendour of the rising sun.

There was a sudden thud, and the canoe glanced raspingly along the smooth side of a projecting rock. A heavy shower of spray fell over him.

For an instant Dan let go his rigid hold on the spar raised himself on his elbows to be ready to swim or be engulfed in the cruel depths.

As he looked around him dazedly, he saw that the darkness had passed, that they were again under the canopy of grey mist, and that Sergeant Silk was once more at work with his paddle, steering composedly into a wide lane of calmly flowing water.

Without speaking, Dan crawled cautiously forward and took up the second paddle.

"Guess we shall manage all right now," said Silk, glancing back over his shoulder. "Nasty bit of river, that, to negotiate, eh ? What was you thinking 'way back there in the dark ? Some scared, wasn't you ? "

"I was thinkin'," said Dan, "that you're just the pluckiest and coolest chap I've known. If you hadn't been, we shouldn't be here now, that's sure. I don't wonder any that none of your chums would come this way to Batoche," he concluded.

"And yet none of them got through by the other way," Silk reminded him. "The Saskatchewan, even in flood, isn't so dangerous as blizzards and Indian bullets."

"Perhaps not, to a man who can manage a canoe as you can," returned Dan. "What were you thinkin' about, yourself ? "

"I ? Oh, I was just figuring out that story you told me about Josh Casterley. You threw a new light upon Josh, you

see. Not about his all-fired meanness in deserting another man and leaving him to starve. "I'm not surprised at that."

Silk drew in his paddle, letting the canoe drift. He turned round slowly, and, facing Dan, took out his pipe.

"It explains a lot of things that I didn't understand before," he went on. "I never clearly understood before just why Josh Casterley took such curious personal interest in Rattlesnake Ranch, or why he never missed an opportunity of doing harm to Mrs. Medlicott and her property. First, he took up the mortgage. Then there was his stealing your mother's stock of horses from the corral, and his trying to set the homestead on fire. He has had your mother in his power for a long time, and his one purpose has been to bring her to poverty and get the ranch into his own possession. You once said something to me about a secret enemy of your family. Josh has been your enemy all along."

"That's so," acknowledged Dan. "But I don't just see what that has to do with his desertion of that poor chap in Turnagain Pass."

"Don't you?" questioned Silk, striking a match and holding it to his pipe. "Then you never ciphered it out, as I have just been doing. Tell me, what was the beginning—the very beginning—of your mother's troubles after she came out to Canada?"

"It was the death of my father," returned Dan. "That was the first thing of all."

"And you never heard how he died?"

Dan shook his head.

"No. He went to the gold diggings and never came back. That's all we knew."

Silk puffed thoughtfully at his pipe.

"Went with his brother—your uncle—didn't he?"

"Yes."

"Exactly. And they found colour, made a rich claim, and were coming home with their gold, or part of it. They were making for Fort Fraser, by way of Turnagain Pass."

Silk paused, looking curiously at Dan, who had started forward.

"What?" cried Dan agitatedly. "Do you mean——?"

"Exactly," Silk nodded. "I mean that his partner, his brother, was Josh Casterley. I mean that the man whom Josh robbed and left there to die of starvation in Turnagain Pass was your own father."

Dan Medlicott swayed as if he had received a blow. But, recovering himself, he leant forward.

"How do you know?" he demanded.

"I have figured it out," rejoined Silk. "For years I have been trying to discover the secret of your father's death, but I never could get on the right trail, for he was supposed not to have got as far as Dawson City. For years I have known that Casterley wasn't Josh's right name; but I never could find what was his true one, and never learnt that he had a brother. But what Nosey Foster said in the blockhouse has given me the key, and the whole story is now clear as the day."

Again Sergeant Silk paused. But presently he went on:

"You see, Dan, what made it so easy for Josh to meddle with your mother's affairs at the ranch was the fact that neither your mother nor any of you had ever knowingly seen your father's brother. And so he could carry on his schemes of villainy unsuspected, getting her deep in his debts, so that in the end he might lay claim to all that was hers as his own. But we know where he is. We can capture him now, and bring him to a deserved punishment for his crimes."

"In the meantime," said Dan, "I reckon you'll push on to Batoche to send off that telegram?"

"Why, cert'nly," nodded Silk, taking up his paddle. "But it's a long journey yet. Presently, when we find a good place, we will make camp and have a feed and a good rest. At nightfall we will go on again. To-morrow night, if we have luck, we shall steal into the fort."

They took shelter in a deep ravine, and after an economical meal, they slept within the warmth of a good fire, taking turns on watch, and soon after nightfall they set off again in the canoe. A light breeze had cleared away the mist, and both banks of the river were visible in the shielding darkness.

All through the long, frosty night they laboured unceasingly at the paddles, with their knees and feet covered with furs. At times they were passing between mountain precipices, at times through the gloom of dense forest glades, where the coyotes howled dismally.

Some three hours after they had resumed their journey down the river, they passed within sight of an Indian village, whose camp-fires flickered through the trees barely a mile away. Their pickets were so near that they might well have discovered the canoe; but Silk kept close under the bank and paddled so silently that his presence was not suspected.

At midnight the two messengers had hidden their canoe and stolen unobserved by the Indians to the gate of the police depot in Batoche. They were promptly admitted by the guard; and when they had had supper, and were turning in for the night, it was with the comfortable consciousness that already their message had been answered from Ottawa, and that there was every prospect of an army being dispatched in all haste to the relief of Battleford.

CHAPTER XXXII

CASTERLEY CORNERED

Some ten miles across the mountains from Battleford, two weary and travel-worn scouts had come to the refuge of a deserted and half-ruined homestead. They had fed their horses, strangled a neglected barndoor fowl, and lighted a fire in the kitchen stove ; and they were now sitting in its warmth side by side on a log, the one busily roasting the fowl, the other waiting for a dipper of water to boil before making tea of the few pinches of tea-leaves remaining of their scanty store.

" Guess this here rooster's one of the survivors from the flood," said the younger of the two, bending over the fire. " He wasn't hatched last spring, nor the spring before that. He's a regular out and out patriarch. Dare say that's why his owners left him in possession, 'stead of takin' him along with them into Battleford."

" Smells some appetising, for all his antiquity," nodded his companion. " Say, we're in luck, having civilised food after the rough tack we've been feeding on since we quitted Batoche. They won't give us anything so good as roast fowl when we get into the fort. I expect they're reduced to siege diet."

After a long silence the younger looked up.

" Sergeant," he said. " Are we goin' to try to get into the fort to-night ? "

" Why, certainly," was the other's prompt response. " We've a better chance of breaking through the enemy's lines in the darkness than by daylight. We'll drop down by the same way that Rip led us the other night. I reckon Colonel Irvine'll be expecting us."

" Yes, unless he's already given us up for lost. Nobody'd believe we could get through those rapids."

" Still," decided the sergeant, " they'll be keeping a watch for us on the off chance. Say," he added, " if that venerable friend of yours is about ready, I'll brew this tea. And then——"

He broke off abruptly and very quietly closed the shutter of the bull's-eye lantern that was beside him on the earthen floor. He rose to his feet and stood listening.

"Dannie!" he said below his breath.

"What's up?" questioned Dan Medlicott. "What d'you hear?"

"Somebody prowling around," answered Silk. "Some rebel scout, I expect, got on our trail. Be quiet. There's more than one. We're sure nabbed, this time."

Dan indicated the broken window as a possible way of escape. Silk shook his head and took up his stand between the stove and the door, with his hand on his revolver.

Presently Dan distinguished the sound outside which had alarmed his companion. It was the unmistakable sound of feet crunching in the frozen snow and stealing cautiously nearer and nearer the clearing at the side of the house.

"Stay where you are, Dan," Silk ordered in a whisper. "Let 'em come right in."

There was a movement at the doorstep. It was no longer cautious. The strangers, whoever they were, had evidently determined to enter boldly. The handle was turned, the door was pushed open, and by the faint light from the stove Dan saw the shadowy figures of two men in fur caps and overcoats. The one leading was a half-breed.

"Ah, *bonsoir*, my friend," he said, entering without further ceremony and looking towards Dan. "It seems we 'ave drop in for a good supper. What?"

Sergeant Silk had slipped behind the door, which he closed sharply as the second stranger entered and glanced apprehensively round into the light of a lantern flashed full upon him.

"Hands up, Josh Casterley!" cried Silk, stepping forward with his weapon levelled menacingly. "This is an unexpected call. But opportune, since it saves me the trouble of searching for you. Hands up, I say!"

Josh Casterley's blinking eyes were directed in astonished alarm at the tall police officer who now confronted him. Very slowly and sullenly he raised his gloved hands above his head.

"Sergeant Silk?" he muttered. "You here!"

"Exactly!" Silk nodded. "You've dropped clean into my hands, this time, like a ripe plum."

Josh looked round again to the door in the hope of still making a desperate bolt for liberty. But Silk's revolver was pointing at him warningly.

"No, there is no escape for you now," said the sergeant very coolly. "You are my prisoner. I have a warrant for your arrest, and I arrest you."

Casterley looked back at him angrily, his narrow eyes blinking.

"On what charge?" he demanded to know.

Silk had laid aside his lantern on the window-shelf, and now he had thrown open his prisoner's overcoat to take possession of his weapons and cartridge-belt.

"On many charges," he answered grimly. "Prison-breaking for one, incendiarism for another. I need not go through the long catalogue of your crimes. There is one, however, which is not on the warrant—the crime that you committed long ago in Turnagain Pass, the crime of which your own brother was the innocent victim. And, by the way," he added, "there is a relative of yours here. Perhaps you would like to be introduced to him under your true name. Dan!" he called.

Casterley's companion had advanced towards the stove, sniffing at the roasting chicken. Dan Medlicott had recognised him as Jules, the bar-tender of Casterley's store at Hilton's Jump.

He greeted Dan as an old acquaintance, without doubting that he was sure of a warm welcome; but Dan paid very little attention to him, whereas the man whom he had known as Josh Casterley had acquired for him a new and sinister interest, and before Sergeant Silk had called him he had already turned to watch what was going on.

"*Tiens:*" exclaimed Jules. "It seems after all we 'ad better 'ave avoid dis place. We 'ave come for fall in trap, eh?"

"Do you recognise your respectable uncle, Dan?" said Silk, putting away his revolver now that his prisoner was disarmed. "I hope you are sufficiently proud of him."

Dan stood looking at Casterley.

"I wouldn't own him as my uncle," he declared.

"It's all a lie," growled Casterley, turning upon Silk. "I don't know what you're driving at. You've found a mare's nest this time. I never had any brother, I tell you. As for the crime you speak of, what do you mean? Where was it, do you say?"

"It was in Turnagain Pass," Silk reminded him.

Josh shook his head and looked blank.

"Never heard of such a crib," he said doggedly.

"Well," rejoined Sergeant Silk. "As it's not for that particular offence that you are arrested, I'm not called upon to explain. You are my prisoner, and that's enough for me. And unless you wish me to put the irons on your wrists, you will do

well to go with me quietly. Stand back there against the wall, and don't move. When I am ready, you will go with me into Battleford."

He seated himself again on the log in front of the stove and invited Jules to join him and Dan in their supper, of which he gave some to Josh Casterley.

While the sergeant was smoking and keeping a watch over his prisoner, Dan and Jules went out and brought their four horses to the door.

"And do you suppose that you're going to ride straight into the fort without hindrance?" questioned Casterley, when Sergeant Silk requested him to mount.

Silk glanced at Jules.

"I think our friend here will see to it that we meet with no serious hindrance," he answered lightly.

He had discovered that Jules was not a very ardent rebel; that, in fact, he was just as willing to serve on one side as the other, and his calculation that the half-breed would lead him through the cordon of Indian pickets was justified by the results. When they were challenged by a scout, the password and sign were duly given, and they were allowed to continue on their way unmolested.

At the gate of the stockade Constable Glaister happened to be on sentry duty, and Sergeant Silk, with his prisoner, Dan, and Jules were, of course, admitted without demur. Josh Casterley was conducted to one of the cells, while Dan and Jules entered the barrack-room to join the garrison.

As for Sergeant Silk, he went at once to the commandant's quarters to give an account of his mission and to report to Colonel Irvine that an expedition of five thousand men from Eastern Canada was already marching to the relief of the refugee settlers.

There were many delays and difficulties incidental to a winter campaign, before the rebel half-breeds and Indians were finally subdued and the settlers in the various strongholds were relieved, but with occasional actions, swift and conclusive, the tide of war rolled on into the very fastnesses of the Northern Forest, where the tribes at last dispersed and their leaders surrendered.

All through the dreary time the Mounted Police were shut up in Battleford and Prince Albert, defending the women and children when they would rather have been out fighting, and it was not until late in the spring that the scarlet-coated troopers rode south over prairies ablaze with flowers, to resume their accustomed duties.

CHAPTER XXXIII

SERGEANT SILK'S ANSWER

"A LETTER, mother?"

Joan and Betty had just come in from the garden, where they had been busy all the afternoon pruning the rose bushes and sowing seeds. Joan threw her scarlet sunbonnet on the end of the sofa as she entered and saw her mother reading.

"A letter, mother?" she cried. "Why, who is it from?"

Mrs. Medlicott folded the letter and returned it to its envelope.

"It is from Lady Elmwood," she answered, apparently a little ruffled by what she had read. "It seems that they are getting anxious for Percy to return home to England. I don't know why, but Lady Elmwood has the idea that he isn't doing any good out here in Canada. She complains that he was sent to us to learn farming and not to go about at the heels of a common policeman, tracking savages and running criminals to earth. I suspect that Percy's letters have given her the impression that he has become a sort of wild desperado, and that farming is about the last thing he thinks of."

"That's just like Percy," commented Betty, with a laugh. "He's been stuffin' up his mother with all sorts of tall yarns—frightening her out of her moccasins by sayin' how he goes ridin' across the prairie on a fiery, untamed steed, armed to the teeth and ready to shoot the first man that dares to say that his necktie isn't straight."

"I wish Lady Elmwood had seen him at work on the steam-plough as I did this morning," said Joan. "Why, there isn't a man on the whole ranch who works better!"

"Even Dave Morrison admits that he could hardly do without him," resumed Mrs. Medlicott. "Says Percy knows as much of the theory and practice of farming as he does himself."

"It's rather extraordinary how Percy has changed, though," said Joan. "He isn't like the same boy who came here eighteen months ago. Don't you remember this day last year—Dan's

birthday—how you talked about his idleness, mother? You called him a waster."

Mrs. Medlicott nodded.

"At that time he was decidedly a waster," she declared. "His laziness and selfishness troubled me as much as his perpetual smoking of cigarettes, his duplicity, and his inclination towards gambling. But somehow the past twelve months have made all the difference in the world in his character. He is more manly, more thoughtful of others, more industrious, and, at the same time, not less of a gentleman. Canada has done him a lot of good morally and physically."

"It is just in his manliness that he has most improved," rejoined Joan. "But that is not due to Canada altogether, or to his work on Rattlesnake Ranch."

"No?" questioned her mother. "Then to what do you attribute the change?"

Joan looked a little confused as she answered hestitatingly:

"Need you ask? Isn't it plain to you that he owes everything to Sergeant Silk?"

"Ah!" smiled Mrs. Medlicott. "I thought you would say that. Yes, undoubtedly Sergeant Silk had had a tremendous influence for good upon Percy, as upon Dan. He has really been the making of both of them."

"Which makes it all the greater pity that the influence is not to continue," Joan regretted. "Now that Sergeant Silk is to be promoted, we shall not see him any more on this patrol. I expect he will be permanently stationed in headquarters at Regina."

"If he decides to accept the promotion, yes," said her mother.

Joan looked round in surprise.

"But of course he will accept it," she protested. "Why shouldn't he?"

"Well," returned Mrs. Medlicott, "he might not wish to. He might prefer to get married and settle down on some quiet ranch."

"Married?" exclaimed Joan in astonishment at so unexpected a suggestion. She could hardly have been more astonished if she had been told that Sergeant Silk contemplated joining the Red Indians and living in a wigwam. "But there is no girl good enough for him," she added quickly. "Besides, he hasn't saved enough money to run a ranch. His pay has never been good. He has been too generous to save. And you know yourself that a ranch requires capital."

"He could easily borrow enough to make a start," her mother

rejoined. "The Government would give him a grant of land, and there are plenty of good sections to be had for the asking along the line of the new railway."

Joan was silent for some moments.

"I hope he won't think of marriage," she said presently, betraying her agitation as she went out of the living-room into the scullery to help Maple Leaf in the work of preparing Dan's birthday tea.

Maple Leaf looked at her curiously. She had overheard what had been said, and she was quick to observe Joan's reddened cheeks and nervous movements.

"Why do you hope that Sergeant Silk will not marry, Miss Joan?" she asked, after a long interval of silence. "He deserves to be happy. He would be happy in a home of his own, after his hard life. I believe he will marry."

"Do you?" said Joan.

Maple Leaf continued to cut and butter the newly made tea-cakes.

"Yes," she responded presently. "Once, when I was dressing his wounded wrist in the camp of Bear's Paw, I turned up his sleeve a little far and saw a piece of red silk ribbon bound round his arm. He knew that I saw it, and was wondering why it was there. And he said: 'Take it off, Maple Leaf. And when I am dead—when the Indians have burnt me at the stake, and you yourself have escaped—take it and give it to her, and tell her where you found it.' But they did not burn him at the stake, Miss Joan. And so——"

"So you gave the ribbon back to him?" said Joan.

Maple Leaf shook her head.

"No," she answered. "He did not tell me what to do with it if he should escape."

"But," objected Joan, "that was wrong. You should have given it back, or else give it to the person he mentioned, whoever she was."

"Yes?" said Maple Leaf. "Perhaps so. I think I will give it back to Sergeant Silk if ever I see him again."

She turned as Betty Medlicott strolled into the scullery to watch the preparations for the birthday tea. And Joan suppressed all her curiosity to know more about Sergeant Silk and the piece of red ribbon.

There was a large family party at tea that evening. Bob Medlicott was at home on leave, and Dan had invited both Maple Leaf and her brother Rippling Water to the birthday feast. Dan

himself was the hero of the occasion, but unusually quiet, leaving most of the talk to Percy Rapson.

They were in the middle of the meal when there came an unexpected interruption. The crunching of a horse's hoofs on the gravel outside drew Betty to the window.

"Well, I never!" cried Betty. "Who d'you think it is? Why, it's Sergeant Silk!"

"Ah!" exclaimed Dan. "I thought he'd turn up. I heard from Antoine that he was at Hilton's Jump this week, and guessed he'd remember it was my birthday."

Sergeant Silk entered with a military chink of spurs and in his best uniform, and looking as neat as a Guards officer on parade. This was his first appearance at the ranch since the night of his capture by the raiding Indians.

"How d'you do, Mrs. Medlicott?" he said in greeting. He shook hands with Joan and Betty. "Happy returns, Dannie," he nodded to Dan. "Hullo, Bob, you here! Heard the news, I suppose? You're promoted to corporal."

He took the chair that was offered to him between Mrs. Medlicott and Joan, but as the meal was nearly over and he had had his own tea, he would only eat a few crumbs of the birthday cake, and most of his attention was directed to Mrs. Medlicott.

"I see you have been buying new machinery, Mrs. Medlicott," he said. "Ploughing by steam, eh? That's good. And how about that coal? Is it going to turn out as you hoped?"

"Well," returned Mrs. Medlicott, "we've had a surveyor here prospecting, and his report is that the ranch is on the top of about the richest bed of anthracite coal in all the Dominion."

"Exactly," nodded Silk, without any show of surprise. "You will work it, of course? You'll sink a shaft right away and start mining?"

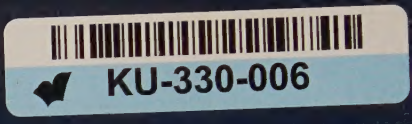
"Do you think I ought to, Sergeant?"

"Why, cert'nly. I don't only think, I know. It'll pay heaps better than grain and fruit and cattle all together."

"That's what I've been saying to Mrs. Medlicott all along," interposed the Honourable Percy. "I'm glad you agree with me. But she says she doesn't know how she's going to get hold of a capable manager. I'd take on the job myself only I'm too young and my people want me back in England."

He paused and looked straight across at Sergeant Silk.

"The only man I know who's really capable of working the thing," he said pointedly, "is yourself, Sergeant."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